

our shores of starlight (come sailing in)

by kurgaya

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Summary: AU - canon divergence; Zoro/Luffy; slow build; fluff; nakamaship - At Shells Town, Luffy does not meet Roronoa Zoro. Instead, he acquires a sword.

1. Chapter 1

- Cross-posting from A03

****Notes****: Written for the '15-16 opbigbang. Not gonna lie, this is almost 50k of self-indulgent fluff and feelings. This is very much a slow build, canon-retelling-with-feels story (especially nakamaship feels). There is Zoro/Luffy in it, but only really towards the very end. I think that's because I like writing the formation of relationships more than any actual romance whoops.

****Warnings****: Canon-typical violence

****Artwork****: I don't think accepts embedded links, but there is ARTWORK for this story ! :D With MASSIVE thanks and stupid, gooey, happy feelings to the incredible trashyscarface! Follow the link through to my A03 account to find the story and art over there, and please squeal over it because I definitely did :3

* * *

><p>our shores of starlight (come sailing in)

****_ I _****

_You put your hand out
>Opened a door
You said come with me, boy
>I want to show you something more
>- Dear Fellow Traveller; Sea Wolf<p>

* * *

><p>Shells Town is a neighbourhood peaceful only in the lull of its waves against the shore, foamy water of idealised horizons pulsing with the heartbeat of travellers that linger on the sands. Many-a-man cast their gaze out into the sunrise, wishful thinkers hoping that the rays of gold will lower their burning sails and cast them off into the sea. This is not a strange phenomenon for the era of pirates, but a little queer, perhaps, for the people of Shells Town, who have enough to worry about before the dreams of pirates come yohoho-ing their way.<p>

Luffy does not stay long in Shells Town; he does not need the rising of the sun to embolden his heart. Thus, he never strays from his path towards the Grand Line, not even as his feet carry him unbidden towards the heart of the town â€" the marine base, the unquestionable word of Captain Morgan, and the first crewmate that Luffy will find there, locked away by the captain's terrible smile and the silence of the subordinates that scamper in his shadow.

"Executed?" Luffy asks, blinking a dazzled curiosity at the cowering mother and child, and then he tips back the loved edges of his straw hat to peer up at Captain Morgan. "Why?"

"For an insult against me," growls the marine, the predatory snarl to his words somewhat muffled by the impressive iron slab that encases his jaw, but fierce all the same.

Just a hair's breadth away from the colossal axe that replaces Morgan's right hand, the little girl snuffles, old enough to understand that not even her mother's arms can protect her now.

"_Oooh_," Luffy says, almost cooing his sound of realisation. "_An insult_, huh? I get it now."

And so â€" as if just to prove his point â€" he swings back a fist and clobbers Captain Morgan through a wall.

The captain responds in kind, defiant to the laughter of Luffy's spirit, uninhibited, loud, and free, and returns each of Luffy's blows with an almighty strike of his axe. The marine base disintegrates about them, crumbling into submission beneath the weight of their assault, and it is as one wall of the stronghold quakes into ruin at Morgan's roar, that Luffy tumbles unbidden and cackling into his first mate â€" his first mate to-be.

Not that he is aware of this as he scoops up the nearest scabbard and tugs the sword free, his inexperience incapable of defiling the blade's elegant arc even as he fumbles around.

The sword fells Morgan with one relentless swoop.

Luffy whistles long and low in marvel, and then steps over the bemoaning heap of a captain to find somewhere raucous to fill his stomach. He shakes the steel haphazardly to clean the blood from its edge, and thinks not of his carelessness as he treks his way back into the town. Nor does he notice the rush of lightning up the length of his arm, but when his skin is rubber and his soul is defiant even to the will of a blade, such a protest is merely breath wasted on a

man with the heart of a pirate king.

In fact, Luffy does not realise that he has held onto the blade until Captain Morgan's rampage has quelled and the townspeople freed, but even then, as he huffs dust from the beautiful sheath (if only to protect his food from the grime), Luffy lays the sword close and wonders not of its shine. Nil is his interest in swords, but if either Rika or her mother recognise this fact, they say nothing as he eats and laughs, and eats some more, and then attempts to wiggle the scabbard into a belt loop of his shorts.

He restocks his supplies aplenty, bids the townspeople a warm farewell, and then is quick to ensure that Coby finds his place with the marines, whether the boy likes it or not.

The sea rocks his boat, horizons luring him away. Luffy plonks himself down by the mast and lets the wind guide the way, eager for another adventure and new crewmates to sail at his side.

He has his first mate already, but he won't learn that for a while.

* * *

><p>Days drift past. Weeks roll on. Islands come and go, the sun rises, and the sun sets, and Luffy loses hours to the sky, cloud watching at noon and stargazing at night. The boat is small for a crew but large for one, and though Luffy's hope never wavers with each town that he passes, with each street that he walks with the footsteps of one, and each dock that he departs with barrels full of food and pockets full of coin â€" but less coin, a finite amount, but the least of his concerns â€" he does begin to wonder how long it will take.<p>

He doesn't mind â€" not really. He is alone at sea but not alone, and while the birds talk in squawks and the fish talk in burbles, Luffy holds conversation with them anyway, just as he chats to the sword as if he expects it to answer.

Sometimes it does, but he doesn't usually listen. When he does, it is often as he dozes, half-asleep mouth mumbling incoherent wishes to the sheath. He imagines that the sword talks back, sharing its own desires and goals of a life locked away, but Luffy can never be sure if he actually hears anything, or if his need for nakama merely seeps through his dreams.

The sword attracts attention whenever Luffy disembarks the boat. Some â€" swordsmen, novices, or enthusiasts in their own right â€" question his competence with the weapon, sneering as he walks around the city with the scabbard bouncing against his legs. Rubber skin doesn't bruise easily so Luffy doesn't really care, and he ignores their scorn with the same disregard, happy with his choice to keep the blade and unwelcoming of any suggestions to part with its beauty.

It is beautiful. Aesthetic does not lure Luffy like the thrill of adventure, but even he can appreciate that the blade, sheath, guard and all are something breathtaking to behold. And he does handle the sword occasionally, but mostly to manhandle it from his side to make way for food, rather than anything entailing swordsmanship. His

Devil Fruit gives him all the necessary means to get his point across, although he does occasionally use the sword for actual pointing when he isn't sure that his hands will know the way.

Although Luffy isn't to know when offering directions to passer-bys, his navigational skills put the sword's to shame " if one is open-minded enough to believe that swords can possess any sort of course-plotting ability in the first place.

(Perhaps, retrospectively, this is part of the problem).

Monetary value does not matter to Luffy. To him, a sword is a sword, however sleek, sharp, or sinister the blade, and if the one he carries at his side is worth more his weight in gold " well, then he doesn't care.

Companionship means more to him anyway.

* * *

><p>The only reason that Luffy escapes from the bird intact and undigested is that it met an unfortunate end attempting to gobble-up the sword.<p>

How he is going to get back to his little boat doesn't occur to him as he crash-lands into a crowd of people; carefree, take-it-as-it-comes attitudes hardly ever worry over such insignificant matters after all. Luffy is sure that the sea will reunite him with his possessions eventually " be it sooner rather than later, or perhaps never to his knowledge at all, leading him down, down, down into the depths so that the wreckage can welcome him home. Although a waste it was, food can be restocked and clothes can be re-bought: Luffy's money, on the other hand, is still clinking away in a pouch attached to his shirt, and the sword is still in his grasp, slippery with saliva but none the worse for wear, so nothing has truly been lost.

Instead, Luffy gains a crewmate.

Nami is exactly what he wants in a navigator " that is, nothing except the willingness to become a most treasured nakama (and she does have this desire, Luffy is convinced) " and so she joins him, eventually, once he decimates a street and saves a townspeople from a pirate's hyperbolic, red-nosed wrath.

(Luffy does not consider himself a hero " and he never will. He does not pay heed to pattern that is slowly emerging before him).

Nami argues, snitches, steals and bargains, but when he offhandedly explains how he arrived here via bird and that it was so cool Nami, you should have seen it trying to eat me!_ she drags him off to buy new clothes and supplies anyway.

"You owe me," she says, demanding compensation as it she wasn't counting through the beli from his wallet to stock up on food. "Go and pick out some clothes " you can't just have one set of everything."

"Sure I can," Luffy says, but he goes obediently when she glares.

They don't shop for long â€" or rather, _Luffy_ doesn't shop for long, but Nami continues browsing the windows even as they begin the trek down to the dock, but in a remarkable show of restraint, she doesn't buy anything _too_ outlandish, preferring to save Buggy's stolen (_acquired_) treasure for another day.

"We could've afforded it," Luffy claims, his utter lack of budgeting ability ringing out in a childish tone. Nami's resulting eye roll doesn't deter him from the motions of nose picking, but he does refrain from flicking anything towards her like a toddler's show of friendship.

"_Somebody_ has to have some financial sense," Nami says with a sigh. "And I suppose as your first crewmember, that'll have to be me. But don't worry; I know my way around money. I won't bore you with the details though â€" just know that I charge interest and that you better pay me back, you understand?"

"Sure," Luffy replies, meaning _not really_. He continues swinging his legs from the dock, tempted to stretch his ankles out to skim the sea's emerald surface. He doesn't have a boat, a sail, or even the oars to row himself along (Nami refuses to allow him onto her boat; Luffy has already learned not to argue), but he has everything else that he could need right now, and maybe it is this, Luffy will come to reason, that prompts him to add: "But you're not my first mate."

"_Thank god_," the navigator exclaims, relief escaping in a rushed breath. "Wait â€" I'm not?"

"Nope."

"You mean â€" you have more crewmates hanging around somewhere?"

"Nope," Luffy says again. One hand drums against the hilt of the daitÅ• katana. His smile assures the truth, but he can't explain why. Nami is the first crewmember to step foot upon his boat (or, she will be, once they actually find it), but she is not the first mate â€" or even, truthfully, the first person that Luffy considers to have joined his crew.

He doesn't mean Ace, Coby, or the other people he has met on his journey so far. No, his first mate is somebody else, somebody that has been at his side since Shells Town, even if Luffy can't quite find the words to explain that there has _always_ been a presence there.

But what does it matter? Words are insufficient anyway. Honesty comes from the heart, not from the motions of the tongue and the shape of the lips, liars and thieves as they are. He doesn't need quantifiable reassurance to know that his first mate agenda has already been filled.

Nami, on the other hand, ogles at him, her mouth twisting in confusion. Eyes wide, she glances around the bay as if she is the subject of a practical joke â€" as if Luffy would joke about this â€"

and then flicks her gaze from the captain's hat to his sword, auburn hair framing her disbelief.

"There's nobody here; you haven't even got your _boat_," she states, declaring her naivety.

Luffy cannot blame her. He's not entirely sure what he's talking about either.

"Ah-ha! Don't worry; you'll see," he says, laughing out towards the sea. Waves lap against the shoreline, splashing up against the dock, and in the distance, a rickety sort of shape takes form, the afternoon sun revealing wood, rope, and sail across the horizon.

Luffy's cheerful exclamation at the sight of his boat bellows out over the sound of Nami's disbelieving huff.

He wouldn't have paid any attention anyway.

* * *

><p>Sleeps consumes him that night, pulling him down into the depths of his unconscious. Seawater rocks about the boat, lulling him somewhere far beyond the stars. Luffy will not remember much of the dream come morning, the tangerine hues of daybreak blinding his all-seeing eyes back to the ignorance of reality, but for now, cocooned within the deep of himself, he begins to see.

Gold. Green. Eyes that gleam like a blade's perilous edge, and a mouth that grins only to itself, safekeeping a tongue that holds words like a prayer, whispering them just so that Luffy cannot hear. He strains his ears, wondering if there is a sound that will merge these images together â€" something familiar, perhaps, something like a _name_ â€" but there is nothing to be heard but silence, a low, endless, solitary sound.

Luffy calls out _hello?_ just to break it, wanting to rid his dream of such a terrible state.

He cannot hear it, but laughter bellows out all around.

To him, there is nothing but suggestion, and nothingness waiting to be filled.

* * *

><p>Their little boats of planks and nails don't survive the seas long, but with Kaya's kind-heartedness and Usopp's bravery against Captain Kuro, they do not remain land-bound for long. The Going Merry is a ship of dreams and devotion, a fitting vessel to see them on their way, and so they depart Syrup Village with the rightful crewmember at the helm, Usopp's peculiarly long nose sniffing all the while.<p>

The days drag as the newest addition to their crew adjusts to life at sea. At first, the sniper is confidently skittish, prone to proclaiming outlandish tales of adventures and quests across the deck when nervousness strikes, but he calms as the weeks roll by, slotting himself into the space that had always been there for him.

Luffy likes Usopp. Together they're a riot.

Nami often has things to say about this.

"Aww, but Nami, what else are we supposed to do for fun?" Luffy whines at one such time, cradling the fist-shaped lump he can feel protruding from his head. Sitting cross-legged on the deck, he may or may not be cowering at Nami's feet, and given how ferocious she appeared stalking towards him with the click-clack of her heels, cowering is definitely the safest course of action.

"Honestly, does it look like I care?" asks the navigator, merciless and entirely unfazed by his puppy-dog eyes. She waves a rolled up newspaper at him, wielding it like a blade, and Luffy has to shrink back from the swing lest it slice up his nose with paper cuts.

"The rigging is not a safe place for you two to jump around â€" and yes Usopp, I can see you over there. If you're going to act like fools, can you at least do it quietly?"

"But we wouldn't be fools then," Luffy protests.

Nami glowers. From somewhere hidden across the ship, Usopp squeaks.

"Why am I the only sensible person on this ship?" she bemoans, probably more to herself than her captain, but unable to help himself in the face of his nakama's misery, Luffy is quick to deny:

"You're not the only sensible person!"

For a second, Nami is flabbergast, no doubt believing that he refers to himself. But a moment passes and her anger dissolves with a sigh, exasperation escaping her lips with a muffled oh god.

"You're still going on about that mysterious other crewmember?"

Mysterious other crewmember is definitely spoken with quotation marks, but Luffy still considers it a step forward in convincing his level-headed navigator. He smiles, face glowing like the sun, and Nami's expression flattens out, wavering with his enthusiasm.

"Yep!" the captain says, beaming. Absentmindedly, he reaches to where his sword would rest at his side, only for his fingers to falter at the empty space. Surprise clouds his expression â€" maybe he put it aside before playing with Usopp? â€" but before his confusion can grey into unease, he plasters a smile back on as Nami rolls her eyes.

Unaware of her captain's turmoil, she shoves tangerine hair away from her face with an unreadable expression but doesn't quite seem to know what to say.

"Wait, wait," Usopp calls, inching out of his hiding place. He tiptoes over, wary of the navigator's wrath but lured by the conversation taking place. "There are four of us?"

"Apparently," Nami grumbles, crossing her arms. The newspaper bobs in

her grasp, folded pages seeming to wilt with her disbelief. Usopp cringes at the tone.

"Ah. You'll meet him eventually," Luffy explains, grinning wildly.

"But â€"

"_Him_" Nami repeats, interrupting the sound of Usopp's confusion.

"Yeah!" Luffy replies, unable to explain the pronoun choice but liking the sound of it on his tongue anyway. "I think so."

"You _think so_" Nami cries.

Luffy nods, straw hat flopping over his face. "I'm not sure yet. I'll have to ask."

The navigator and sniper exchange a glance. Usopp swallows, Nami's sharp look apparently meaning something to him, but Luffy is incapable of deciphering his nakamas' exchange. Happiness bubbles up inside of him at this realisation; he is glad that his crew are getting along, glad that they have found a friendship in each other that Luffy cannot provide.

"What does he look like?" Usopp asks, striking a heroic pose as he bellows out: "Is he an awesome, undefeatable warrior that wanders the land and can beat up fifty â€" a hundred! â€" men with a single swing of his sword? Because â€" I mean â€" we could use one of those sometimes. N â€" Not that I'm suggesting that that Great Captain Usopp isn't capable or anything â€"!"

"Dunno," Luffy says, wishing that this wasn't the case. "He's kinda shy."

"Oh god," Nami breathes.

"Oh," Usopp says, just as downhearted. He is quick to correct his crestfallen expression though, springing his body up into animation so that his curls bounce with every eager word: "Well â€" well that's all right! Have you introduced yourself? Maybe you should tell him all about our adventures! Do you â€" I don't know â€" write to him or something? Or maybe he's invisible! Is his invisi â€" _hey_, Luffy, where are you going?"

"To talk to him!" he replies, already catapulting his rubber body across the deck, leaping away with an unnatural bound. Straw hat flapping around his neck, he dives through the hatch to the men's quarters and crashes into the hammocks, laughing boisterously when his elasticated limbs tangle into the ropes.

"Hey, hey, sword â€" are you in here?"

Nobody answers, but when Luffy throws himself from the hammocks and bounces across the sofas, the scabbard seems to appear as if beckoned, its clattering across the floorboards drawing the captain's attention.

Gleefully, he scoops it up, rubbing its elegant sheath against his

waistcoat as if to apologise for any tarnishes. "Oh, there you are! Usopp says I should tell you about myself to stop you from being shy â€" although maybe you'll always be shy, but that's all right because I have lots to tell you and I don't mind if you don't want to talk much. My name's Luffy, I'm not sure if I said that, but even if I did, it's nice to meet you! What's your name?"

He plonks himself down on his hammock, the momentum of his crash-landing almost toppling him out of it again. The sword says nothing, giving no indication that it has even heard his words, but Luffy presses on anyway, undeterred by the silence. Laying the blade over his lap, he drums his fingers along the sheath, marvelling at the angelic white shine.

"Do you even have a name?" he asks, straining his ears for any sound beyond the creak of the ship, the whoosh of the waves against the hull, and the rush of the wind past the mainsail above the deck, the midday gales guiding them on their way.

There is nothing.

Luffy pouts. "I could give you a name?" he suggests, turning the sheath over as if it has any likelihood of being inscribed with the answer. Yet, the scabbard's beauty is unmarked, so Luffy reaches past the handguard to tug the blade free. Elastic around the hilt, his hand grips tight, but something rushes across his skin before he can draw the sword â€" something painless, but heavy, like a spark or a waterfall's brief cascade, and he jerks his hand back to gawk at the flickers of static across his fingertips.

"Hey!" he cries, realising that for all metaphorical purposes the sword has just bitten him. "That's not very nice!"

And then he realises that the sword has bitten him â€" the sword has protested at being named â€" and he laughs triumphantly, swaying the hammock with his cheer.

"I knew there was somebody in there somewhere! Hey, hey, you can hear me right? What's your name? You're going to tell me your name, right? How'd you get in there anyway? Are you the sword? Can you speak? Can you tell me your name?"

His rushed breath is met with silence, but this only serves to heighten Luffy's amusement.

"Aha, oh man! You are shy aren't you? Or are you scary like Nami? Are you grouchy? You're grouchy aren't you? You're â€" ouch!"

Lightning flickers over his arms, and though his Devil Fruit ensures that it doesn't hurt, Luffy yelps in surprise.

"Hey! Be nice! I'll toss you overboard if you keep misbehaving!"

The sword does nothing as Luffy waggles a finger at it, but the captain cannot decide if he imagines the air of go on, I dare you about it or not. He pouts at being called out on his bluff, resting his chin in one hand, and then smiles once again, excitement overtaking his rounded face of rubber and glee.

"Well, if you're not going to talk, how about I tell you about the time Ace and I fought a giant tiger? That's my brother, by the way, he's the coolest â€" not the tiger, Ace, although that would be coolâ€"|"

* * *

><p>A chance encounter with the bounty hunters Johnny and Yosaku lead them on to the Baratie, the restaurant floating on the seas. Nami frets for the entire journey, casting worrisome glances at Merry's kitchen and muttering about cooks, but she never brings up her concerns beyond pouring over her maps and pressing the ship on. Yosaku soon recovers from scurvy, much to his companion's relief, so Luffy doesn't understand what all of the fuss is about. Yet, a good cook means good food and a new nakama, so he cheers their journey on, eager to see the famous Baratie for himself.

His sword is quiet as they sail on â€" and to Luffy, who has begun to discern the blade's heavy presence from the flits of his imagination, it is an unusual quiet. The bounty hunters provide some explanation when they notice the sword at Luffy's hip; surprise is a common reaction, but recognition is not, and they both gawk and point as the captain pulls the beautiful blade from his side.

"Where'd you find it?" they ask as one, crowding close to inspect the weapon. They bicker between themselves, hemming and hawing with hands rubbing across their chins, and Luffy allows his confusion to show as he passes the sword over.

"Ah man!" Johnny cries, running his fingers up the sheath. "It is the same sword. We filched it off this guy once â€" he was dead, mind â€" "

"A tragedy," Yosaku cuts in, not sounding as sympathetic as he probably should.

"â€" and kept it with us for a while. We figured it was valuable or something, so we were going to sell it on. I mean, it's a great sword, but we've got our own so we didn't really need it â€" "

"Plus, it wouldn't let us draw it," Yosaku grumbles, and Johnny blinks, smiling ruefully.

"Oh yeah, that's true," he says, making a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. "But then we lost it. It was dumb, really. Fell in a river. Couldn't find it again after that. I guess it got washed up somewhere and someone picked it up? It's in pretty good condition too. Where'd you say you found it, brother?"

"Marine base," Luffy says.

"Stole it," the bounty hunters conclude, and they laugh together as the sword is handed back. Luffy accepts it gladly, unable to restrain himself from grasping the hilt possessively when he takes it from Johnny's clutch.

"Take good care of it, yeah?" the bounty hunter says, watching Luffy secure the scabbard back through his belt. "Like we said, we couldn't draw it, but it still got us out of a few tight spots over the years. So, keep it even if you can't use it. It'll do you good."

Luffy thinks of gold and emerald and tigers prowling through a forest, and nods assuredly. He couldn't imagine not taking care of this sword, not when there is the possibility â€" the certainty â€" of a nakama held inside.

"I can draw it," he states as an afterthought, and while this isn't the same as being capable of using the sword, Johnny and Yosaku emit noises of wonder at the declaration.

"Huh," Yosaku says, and they exchange an unreadable glance.

* * *

><p>Chaos explodes the Baratie, but really, this occurs in most places that bear witness to Luffy's will, so he doesn't find himself surprised as decking shatters into the throws of the sea. The head chef â€" the one with the tremendous hat â€" doesn't seem that bothered by the ordeal either, but the other chefs kick up a fuss, and none more so than Luffy's new nakama. Sanji will be a formidable member of Luffy's crew â€" he already is, only, the cook is yet to know â€" and the captain is thrilled to fight beside such a no-nonsense man. Sanji is unrelenting in the best of ways, and his conviction reminds Luffy of Nami in a way. Yet, there is something that sets the cook apart, something yearning and pained, a heart filled with love and a mouth filled with smoke, ashes of bitter words unseen beneath the fanciful declarations of worship, and Luffy knows that joining the crew will do Sanji good, just as it has quelled Nami's wildfire and strengthened Usopp's laugh.

Luffy enjoys his time at the Baratie, despite the dishwashing. Don Krieg's table manners leave much to be desired, but the Baratie chefs refuse to bow to the pirate captain's threats. They are a fearsome group, wielding knives and pans with a skill that Luffy has never seen, so he deems it appropriate that his new cook will be a man from such a rowdy bunch.

He looks forward to introducing Sanji to Merry and the crew â€" but then Nami sails away with the ship, abandoning them to a destination unknown, and there is no time for introductions. The crew's panic is understandable, Luffy supposes, and he does feel a twinge at Usopp's expression when the sniper realises that his beloved vessel has been stolen from him, but Luffy knows Nami, and he trusts Nami, and he has every plan of going after her once Don Krieg has been stopped.

Then a hawk-eyed man steps foot onto the Baratie, his lean, imposing figure enwrapped in robes of shadow and blood. Luffy thinks not of him bar noting the odd, golden hue of his gaze, and yet he cannot explain the surge of bloodlust â€" the thrill, the need to fight â€" at the sight of the stranger's inconceivable sword. For the briefest of moments, he wants to cross blades with this man, to test his skill and see if he is truly worthy of holding the title of the Greatest Swordsman in the World. He wants to dual this man who cuts the air and carves the horizon apart, and he wants to know, desperately, every fibre of his being screaming for it, how it feels to walk with the stride of a dream accomplished and a life-long promise fulfilled â€"

Dracule Mihawk glances towards him, and Luffy is reaching for the blade at his side â€" it quakes, a storm of need thundering out, and

Luffy can feel its lightning yells all the way up his arm, pushing him, encouraging him, _demanding_ that he just grasp the hilt and _use me, come on, he's right_ â€œ

Luffy shoves his hands into his pockets.

(_HE'S RIGHT THERE!_)

Luffy thinks of nothing but smashing Don Krieg's face into the ground. He thinks of nothing but protecting the lives of the Baratie staff, protecting their dreams, and seeing his own through to the end. He thinks of nothing but finding Nami, finding Merry, and ensuring that Sanji finds a place in their crew as they part from the Baratie with wishes and tearful farewells.

He thinks nothing of Dracule Mihawk and yet he thinks everything, and he thinks of a voice in the back of his mind asking
â€œ

Why?

Luffy doesn't reply.

* * *

><p>They get Nami back. Arlong learns not to mess with the Straw Hat Pirates.<p>

(Soon â€œ the world will learn).

* * *

><p>Loguetown â€œ the birthplace of the Pirate King, the town of beginnings.<p>

"Meh, we won't stay long," Luffy says as the crew disembarks and gathers around him, their eyes turned upwards to marvel at the glorious town, the bustle, and the streets of ruby, sapphire, and gold. It is a beautiful town, unbefitting of its violent history, but perhaps the people of Loguetown are incapable of seeing the Pirate King's execution as such, but rather, consider the stain in pirate history something to be celebrated, and something worth lavishing the town in gold.

Luffy can feel his dream pulling him forward, the mysterious ring of One Piece calling him from far away. It would be right, he thinks, to see where the Pirate King breathed his last before sailing the Straw Hat crew into the Grand Line. Their next adventure is just a horizon away now, and Luffy can feel Raftel's skies urging his heart up into the sun. Complete, their crew is yet to be, but he is sure that his nakama are waiting for him in seas far and wide. East Blue has nothing to offer anymore bar a safe return when a dream is fulfilled, and Luffy knows he will not look back as they plummet down Reverse Mountain and into the seas beyond.

"I wanna see the execution stand," he announces, and his crew shrug their consent, diverging off to follow wayward paths of their own.

Luffy is in no hurry to reach the plaza centre â€œ he is never in a

hurry, assured that his life will turn at its own pace, bringing adventure, excitement, and dreams as it will " so he kicks up his feet as he wanders, enjoying the flurry and colours of the town.

Cashless, he window-shops a while, pressing his nose up against the windowpanes. Shopkeepers gauge the intensity of his interest by the smears on the glass, but Luffy never steps foot into the shops. Occasionally, he is tempted, but thoughts of the Pirate King restrain him, and it is as he pulls away from one such time (the bakery had almost swayed him), that he catapults himself into a stranger and throws them both squawking to the ground.

His sword slides free from his belt loop, but Luffy doesn't notice until the young woman hoisting herself up from the dirt beside him emits an excited sound.

"Oh!" she cries, jabbing a pair of thick-framed glasses back onto her face. She scoops up the scabbard as if it is something worth worshipping and gently brushes it down, uncaring for the dishevelment of her clothes and hair. "This sword is the Wad  Ichimonji, isn't it?"

"The wassit?" Luffy asks, tilting his head at the jumbled words.

"The Wad  Ichimonji!" the bespectacled woman parrots, gushing over the blade. "It's one of the twenty-one great-grade swords! It's worth at least a million beli!"

"A million?" Luffy echoes, picking his nose disinterestedly. "Huh, that's more than my bounty!"

At these words, the woman's attention flicks away from the sword. Dark hair framing a rounded, prettily innocent face, she blinks at him, blinks some more, and then wipes her glasses on the edge of her shirt as if she cannot believe what she is seeing.

"What?" Luffy asks, scratching the back of his neck. Wide eyes follow the motion, and the woman's mouth falls open as her eyes rest on the straw hat at his shoulders.

"H " hey!" she cries, the resulting squawk drawing stares from down the street. Her accusing finger is so melodramatic that it almost swipes his nose off, and Luffy blinks cross-eyed at her hand. "You're Monkey D. Luffy!"

"Yep!" he says, grinning cheerfully until she launches up onto her feet in outrage

"I can't believe it!" she shrieks, oval face puffing out in anger. "How did you come by this sword? You stole it didn't you? There's no way you have any skill in swordsmanship! What were you doing with it " were you going to sell it? People like you have no right to be handling something as magnificent as the Wad  Ichimonji!"

Despite the snarling from the woman towering above him, Luffy remains seated in the street, blinking up at the stranger with an impossible smile and large, dangerous eyes.

"People like me?" he asks.

The woman narrows her eyes, clutching Wad  Ichimonji protectively to her chest, and then snarls, "_Pirates_" with all of the loathing she can muster.

Luffy flicks his gaze between her hateful eyes and the blade. "Oh," is what he says, holding out his hand. "Can I have my sword back?"

She splutters, unable to comprehend that he has even _asked_. "No! It is my duty to ensure that you low-level pirates don't get your hands on workmanship like this! Is it not _just_ â€" can't you hear this sword crying out?"

No, Luffy doesn't say, casting his mind back to that fateful, disastrous encounter with Dracule Mihawk, _but I could before the Baratie_.

"Can you?" he asks instead.

The woman's answering stare makes Luffy wonder if he's grown a second head. "Wha â€" of course I can!"

"Oh, okay then," he replies, finally dropping his hand away. "You can keep it."

The incredulity of her stare increases. "I â€" I can?"

Again, Luffy cannot claim to hear the sword say anything, but he rather imagines that the ensuing hiss of lightning across the sheath bellows _hell no_ out into the street. The woman yelps and drops the sword with an agonised wheeze, tucking her scorched palms into her chest, and Luffy dives forward to catch the blade before it can clatter at her feet.

"Sorry lady, bye lady!" he blurts in one rushed breath, flinging himself down the road. People scramble out of the way of his whooping laughter, grumbling to themselves at his manners, but Luffy doesn't care as the plaza opens out before him, the execution podium a monument standing tall and proud at the heart of the town.

Itching to climb it, he slides the sword â€" Wad  Ichimonji, he supposes â€" back into his belt, and reaches for the first rung of the tower.

* * *

><p>In his final moments â€" in his almost final moments â€" as Nami, Usopp, and Sanji fight to rescue him through the crowd of jeering, yelling, and horrified bystanders, Luffy looks out across the market square towards the people, his nakama, and his last horizon. He smiles, offering the afternoon sun a fitting farewell, and mere seconds before a royal will bends the skies and calls forth a thunderbolt to twist the turn of the world, he remembers Wad  Ichimonji at his side.

He cannot reach the blade with his hands cuffed, but this does not stop his smile from spreading out across his face, pushing aside

freckles and scars to mirror the golden glow of the sun.

Ah well, Luffy thinks, and he would shrug if he could, _this was fun_.

Lightning crashes down, white wildfire blitzing in front of his eyes.

Through the chaos of it all, Luffy cannot be sure of anything â€" not even the pounding of his own heart in his ears â€" but he thinks, for a moment, that he feels a hand on his shoulder and a weight across his back, almost as if â€" although he couldn't say who â€" somebody is trying to protect him.

He hears the light chink of metal, a hushed, cursed breath, and then when the world splinters around him, nothing at all.

Afterwards, he brushes himself off, brushes his sword off, and then scoops up his hat and brushes that off too.

"I don't believe in God," Sanji tells him, but as they flee the marketplace with their dreams intact and their lives unscathed (or â€" mostly unscathed, considering Usopp's declaration of an imminent heart attack), the cook sounds like he isn't quite sure anymore.

Luffy laughs, loud and free. "Neither do I," he says, and he pats the hilt of his sword.

* * *

><p>At Cactus Island, they find the hospitable town of Whiskey Peak, and they drink their weights in rum and party long into the night.<p>

At Whiskey Peak, Luffy meets Roronoa Zoro.

(Although â€" he'd done that long ago).

* * *

><p>It isn't the hangover that wakes him, that's for sure. Bloated with an inhuman stretch, the rubber man rolls into awakening, groaning as his stomach sloshes and churns. Midnight quiet envelopes the room, having rocked his crew to sleep, and Luffy peers around the darkness to spy them all sprawled out across the chairs, comfortably asleep after a rowdy night of laughter. Usopp's goggles are jammed awkwardly against his nose, so the captain extends one sleepy arm to adjust them, giggling to himself when the sniper sniffs and twitches as his goggles are put aside.<p>

Outside, there is a rush of feathers and squawks as the evening birds scramble into flight, but Luffy yawns over the sound of their squabbling, unconcerned by the odd, duck-like quacks in the distance. He finds his hat flattened beneath him and spends a moment fussing over it, and then realises, with a great lurch of effort, that his feet can't quite reach the floor.

He laughs. Floorboards creak beneath him.

/Get up!/

Luffy throws himself upwards, trips over a bottle, and hurtles across the room, rubber limbs flailing about as he hops, jumps, and dances to catch himself. He bounces off the sofa, narrowly avoiding Sanji and his open-mouthed snores, and then latches onto a barrel of wine to right himself. Momentum lurches his floundering body for a few more feet, but eventually, with one last tremendous wobble, Luffy comes to a stop in the centre of the room.

"Eh?" he says, blinking as he scans the room again. "Did somebody say something?"

The only response is a particularly harrowing snore from Usopp. Scratching his cheek, Luffy waddles over to the door and tugs it open, elongating his head outside to see if anybody had been knocking.

Moonlight refracts across the sea's roiling surface, spilling a glow of diamonds and crystals into the room. The pristine white edge of WadÅ• Ichimonji glistens in the light, seeming almost to beckon him forward, and the captain stares at it with his mouth pressed into a firm line.

He has hardly handled the blade since the confrontation at the Baratie â€" his near-escape at Loguetown notwithstanding. Luffy has yet to find an explanation for what happened at the Baratie â€" his bloodlust, his devastating desire to cross blades with the infamous Dracule Mihawk â€" and while Luffy is not one to turn his nose up at a fight, he is glad to have walked away from the restaurant without testing the swordsman's wrath.

He would have died â€" of this, he is sure. He would have died without knowing why, or knowing what it was that drove him to lift a blade against Mihawk's, and he would have died without reaching Raftel, without rescuing Nami and protecting his nakamas' dreams.

Luffy does not like having his will taken away from him.

He wobbles towards the sword, the shadows of his steps disturbing the moonlight. Unhesitant, he scoops it up, flipping the beautiful sheath over in his hands as if daring it to bite. It doesn't, unusually docile, and Luffy feels his anger waver; gaze softening, he sighs, and then lifts the blade up to scrutinise it at eye-level.

"You spoke, didn't you?" he asks, convinced that he had heard somebody calling him into consciousness. The sword says nothing, but Luffy gets the impression that it wants to say more â€" if it could, or if he could hear it, and he frowns, turning back to the front door.

Something is wrong, but he cannot place his finger on it. Humming, he scans the room once again, checking the wellbeing of each of his crew in turn, and then, once satisfied that they have come to no harm, waddles outside into the street with WadÅ• Ichimonji in hand.

Outside, a hundred pairs of eyes turn to stare bewilderment towards him, fifty hushed conversations faltering at his presence. Luffy

blinks and tries to smile, recognising the many faces of the townspeople, only to yawn over his attempt at a joyous greeting.

"Oh wow! Are you guys still partying?" he asks instead, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He almost clonks himself with WadÅ• Ichimonji's hilt as he does so, and Luffy giggles, oblivious to the mounting tension about him.

The first gunshot _cracks_ into his jaw, only for his elasticated skin to rebound the bullet straight back out again. It whizzes into the sky amidst screams and yelps of shock, and Luffy scratches his unmarred cheek, continuing to laugh.

"You guys must've drunk a_ lot_!"

Even Igaram's court-curly hair seems taken aback at the cheer. The townspeople glance at each other, all wearing the reluctance of the designated puppy-kicker, and Luffy has just the time to spar a thought for whatever poor, unfortunate animal this crowd of drunken loons are conspiring against before the second, the third, and the fourth gunshots detonate into the night. One ricochets from his shoulder and another from his thigh, but the last _pings_ against WadÅ• Ichimonji's sheath as Luffy flings himself into the sky.

/Go left!/ bellows a voice, and the captain _launches_ himself over the rooftop and into the adjacent street below, elasticated footsteps bouncing him harmlessly across the concrete. Shouts from the apparently murderous residents rise up behind him, their angry snarls like the howls of wolves calling up at the moon, and Luffy shoves a fist into his mouth to smother the sounds of his laughter.

The next round of gunfire dampens his spirits somewhat, but not enough to eradicate Luffy's blinding smile. Adrenaline pounding through his Devil Fruit body, the captain feels _free_ at the thrill of the fight, and though the cause of this confrontation is beyond him, Luffy can appreciate the danger as he appreciates all of the simpler pleasures in life â€" the sea, the sky, and the plates of meat that Sanji still cannot resist piling up before him.

/Hey! I said left!/

The townspeople advance, lead furiously by Igaram and his hyperbolic curly hair, and though Luffy cannot identify who the voice belongs to, or, in fact, where it even originates from, he finds himself heeding its directions despite the dubious advice.

"That _was_ left!" Luffy insists, going left again. He skids around the alley corner and ducks behind a barrel, unflinching as gunshots crackle against the wood. His belly _is_ a bit of a target, he supposes, grinning to himself, and in his ears the stranger's voice groans an infuriated sigh:

_/Your _other_ left./_

"I don't have another left!"

/Right, then!/

Luffy rolls out from his hiding place, narrowly escaping the ironclad punch that disintegrates the barrel. Emitting a startled _woohooooa?_

sound in awe, he scrambles into the street, clutching his hat protectively as the woman bearing knuckle-dusters whirls his way.

"Why didn't you just say that in the first place?" he asks the voice, bounding away from the lethal punches. The woman roars, bear-like despite the flowery dress she adorns, and shouts orders at her fellow townspeople, seeming to speak in some unintelligible code of titles, days, and numbers.

/I did!/ the voice insists, growling over the sound of gunfire.

Luffy springs up onto a roof, knocking away the advancing mob in a hurricane of exhilaration. WadÅ• Ichimonji bounces against his leg, and the strings of his hat whip across his chin. "No you didn't!"

/Before! I said it before! You just haven't been listening to me!/

"_Oh_," Luffy says in a moment of realisation, ducking, rolling, and scrambling away as the horde of hunters-cum-villagers approach, wielding guns and knives in desperate, wary hands. Abruptly, he knows where he has heard the voice before, and he glances down as his sword's ethereal edge catches the light of the watching moon. "Like at the Baratie?"

The voice â€" the man, the sword? â€" heaves a sigh. _/You're bringing that up now? These guys are from the Baroque Works, you know, and in case you haven't noticed, they're after your goddamn bounty!/_

"Hey!" Luffy snaps, affronted at the insult. "I like my bounty!"

/Well I don't â€" it's far too low. You should change that./

And Luffy â€" laughs.

"Maybe _you_ should do something about it," he replies, enjoying the banter.

/Yeah?/ the voice answers, his tone the sea and the storms rising up to the challenge. _/Draw me then. I'll show you what I can do./_

"That lady said you're some really impressive sword, or something. Does that mean you're pretty sharp?"

/Pretty sharp/ the voice snarls, insulted. _/Who do you think I am?/_

"I dunno," Luffy says lightly, cocking his head as if the sword has the eyes to see his puzzlement. Perhaps it does, or perhaps it doesn't, but either way, Luffy cannot deny how little he knows about this new, familiar voice in his ear. "Who _are_ you?"

For a moment, the sword seems entirely inanimate, his voice wordless in reflection of such a weighted question. Still overtakes Luffy â€"

he waits, uncaring for the chaos that hunts him. The only sound seems to be the thundering of danger in his ears â€" the shouts of the townspeople, the surge of adrenaline in his blood, and the sheer _hush_ of the predator mulling the question over at his side.

/Roronoa Zoro/ the voice declares, and the name feels like lightning on Luffy's tongue when he repeats it back.

"Zoro's a cool name!"

Longer is the next pause, the aftermath of a stuttering breath, and Luffy wonders if swords can be flabbergasted, or if Zoro has a unique ability to sound as if he's blushing. _/Err â€" thanks. Now come on, use me. These weaklings are embarrassing./_

* * *

><p>Zoro is right, much to Luffy's amusement.<p>

He is _pretty sharp_ after all.

* * *

><p>Vivi takes to life on the Merry like a duck to water, which is to say, with a nervy sort of hesitancy given Carue's strange aversion to anything that isn't rock, earth, or sand. Nami, on the other hand, takes to Vivi remarkably quickly, and barely a day has passed on the sea to the island of Little Garden before the two women can be found chatting and laughing as if they have known one another for years. It must be a girl thing, Luffy reasons, and though he isn't particularly interested in the gossip that passes between his navigator and guest, he is glad for their happiness and the spark that Vivi has brought to their crew.<p>

She won't sail on the Merry forever, he knows; Alabasta has her loyalty and love, and her heart belongs to the waves of gold and sand, the midday heat, and the humid nights of oasis dreams. Vivi is a princess â€" a leader, a _queen_ â€" and she will never abandon her kingdom to rule the ocean currents, but that doesn't make her any less of a pirate, just as it doesn't make her any less a part of Luffy's crew.

He will be sad to see her go. They all will. But Luffy isn't going to worry about that time until it comes, preferring to enjoy each day as it passes. Some things he cannot change â€" some things he won't change â€" and he sees little point in fretting over a future so undetermined.

Instead, Luffy strives to appreciate their time together, and it's easy with how effortlessly Vivi slots herself into the crew. She is courageous, spirited, kind, and strong, and she is also the first person to take Luffy's declaration of his first crew member in stride. This encourages a round of gaping mouths and flabbergasted blubbering from the rest of the crew, but Vivi merely smiles, flustering slightly at the sheer _joy_ that breaks out on the captain's face.

"There are stranger things in this world," the princess explains, twirling a lock of fine opal and sky around her finger in an almost

whimsical fashion. "Truly, a sword housing a spirit is not so bizarre. You said his name is Zoro?"

"Since when?" Nami blurts, her exclamation unheeded with the enthusiasm of Luffy's agreement.

"Well then, it's nice to make your acquaintance, Zoro-san," Vivi continues, and now she drops her attention to the katana at the captain's side; gazing upon it with a smile, she is the first to address it personally, and Luffy feels the sheath warm beneath his hand.

"He's blushing," Luffy says.

/I am not!/

"And he says it's nice to meet you too."

/I did not!/

"Well you should, 'cause that's polite. Vivi's really nice."

/I'm sure/ the sword grumbles, a hint of sarcasm twinging his flat tone into something like a sigh. He seems to sigh a lot, Luffy notes, but then Nami and Sanji each have their own verbalisations of umbrage, so maybe this isn't so strange.

"He agreed with me," the captain informs the crew, and Vivi's pleasant laughter isn't enough to drown out Zoro's heavy:

/You're impossible./

Luffy grins.

Vivi's outlook lessens some of the disbelieving, wary glances from the rest of the crew, but it isn't until the wintry winds of Drum Island have lifted the storms and blossomed a bouquet of pinks and purples into the sky that Zoro's presence is finally, unanimously accepted amongst the crew.

Tony Tony Chopper is a character made up of all things sweet and sugary, and truly is far, far too adorable to sail with their motley crew. Luffy recruits him anyway "because what kind of pirate captain doesn't want a talking reindeer as their doctor?" and Chopper sniffs, sobs, and cries his heart out, but then giggles a little when Luffy plonks his straw hat down to nestle between his antlers.

Their nakama are simply besotted "and none more so than Zoro, who claims not to watch the tiny doctor with all of the protectiveness that a sword can muster, but still urges Luffy to offer comfort whenever Chopper's bottom lip so much as wobbles into a frown.

/He's just" so small/ Zoro offers as an explanation, sounding parental and terrified.

"But you've seen how awesome his other forms are," Luffy points out, charmed and indisputably fascinated by the sword's reluctant admission. Originally, he wouldn't have pegged Zoro as the

soft-hearted type, but it fits, Luffy decides, just as he decides not to test the sword's wrath by teasing him about it.

/I didn't say he wasn't capable of looking after himself./

"Neither did I," Luffy notes, squishing a smile against one of the banisters of the Merry. Sea-spray splashes up against his legs as the ship sails on, but it is a calm day for the crew with islands and adventure far beyond the sunlight horizon. Luffy is a little bored, but there are clouds aplenty to pass the lazy time.

"All of our nakama can look after themselves," he says, watching Merry's hull glide through the open water below. "But I still wanna protect them."

He leaves the don't you? unsaid, but the sword spirit seems to hear it anyway, replying with an undecided sound:

/He's tiny/ Zoro bemoans.

Luffy definitely does not laugh.

(They're getting somewhere).

"Yeah, he's perfect for cuddling!" he agrees, twisting his elastic body around to scan the sun deck for the nakama in question. "Hey, hey Chopper! Come here for a sec!"

The candy-floss hat and button-blue nose of the doctor dart upwards at the beckon, but there is no deterring the captain's elongated reach from sweeping Chopper up and hauling him across the ship.

Chopper shrieks, flails, and frankly looks quite terrified for a moment, but he lands safely in Luffy's lap with no bruises beyond those from a bounce - which is to say, absolutely none at all.

"Hi!" Luffy chimes.

"Hi," Chopper replies, blinking innocent eyes up at the captain's dazzling smile.

/For god's sake./

Luffy's grin widens, but he does not tease the sword, instead addressing Chopper's frazzled expression. "I wanna hug. Do you want a hug? You're all soft and squidgy and you smell - huh, you smell kinda weird, actually. Have you been helping Usopp out?"

"Yeah!" the reindeer squeals, burying himself into the captain's embrace with none of his previous shyness. "He was showing me his creations. I like Usopp. He's funny. But do you think I should take a bath?"

"Nah," Luffy says, ruffling up the reindeer's fur. Chopper giggles, his ears twitching as Luffy's fingers find a particularly itchy area. "Where's the fun in that? I probably smell worse anyway."

"Oh, no!" Chopper blurts, shaking his head vehemently. "No, no, you

smell like sunlight!"

"Eh?" Usopp says then, emerging from the lower deck just in time to catch Chopper's gleeful squeal. Gunpowder is smudged on his cheek and his hair is frazzled beyond its usual curl, and his expression mirrors that of the captain's. "Did you say that Luffy smells like _sunlight_? But sunlight doesn't smell of anythingâ€¦ does it?"

The exclamation draws the attention of Nami and Vivi, their chatter drifting away to allow Chopper's little voice to carry out across the deck.

"It does. It smells likeâ€¦ like dawnbreak, where everything smells cold and warm at once and you're wondering if the top layer of snow is going to melt from the trees or not; like lazy mornings, where you know you've got morning breath and you've got sweat in your fur and you stink of it, but the bed is comfy and you're really cosy and you don't want to get up because it's safe and â€" and â€" everything's perfect and everyone's okay and you don't have to worry about anything. That's what it smells like. Like â€" like home."

The crew blink at him, their faces twisted into thought as they attempt to imagine the scent.

"That'sâ€¦ that's so neat, Chopper!" Usopp cries, and though he doesn't sound as if he has any idea what Chopper is going on about, he seems awed by the idea. "What about me? And the others?"

Realising that almost the entire crew are staring at him, Chopper flusters and tries to hide himself under Luffy's arm before answering. "Ah, wellâ€¦ You smell like wood, Usopp, and metal, but like â€" like forests, like you could put anything together and create anything and be anything you wanted. Sanji smells like fire, but the scent you get after a fire has been burning for a really long time and gone out, and the smoke's all heavy and the coal's all white and fine, and there's just something about it that makes you want to light it again. And Nami, you smell like new books and a hint of sweetness that must be your tangerines, but you don't smell like ink because you never spill any â€" which is strange, actually, because somebody smells like lightning and I thought it would be you â€"

"Lightning?" Luffy interrupts, perking up.

"Yeah," Chopper says, wrinkling his nose. "Like long days of rain and stormy nights when the sky's purple and scary, and the wind is cold and brisk and danger seems to crackle in the air. But it's a nice smell too, because it warns everyone to stay safely tucked inside their homes so that nothing can hurt them."

Here he wrinkles his nose again and turns his head, trying to pinpoint the source of the scent. Indecision flickers across his face, scrunching up the fur around his nose, but his eyes do not settle on any of the watching crew.

"Maybe I'm just imagining it," he says faintly, curling in on himself slightly. Nobody says anything, and Chopper laughs nervously at the scrutiny. "I'm sorry."

They rush to reassure him; Luffy buries his nose in Chopper's fluffy crown.

"Does the scent linger anywhere, Chopper?" Vivi asks over the assurances.

Unseen, Luffy smiles into his doctor's fur, but in a remarkable show of restraint, he waits for Chopper to prove what most of the crew deem impossible before saying anything.

"Well â€" yes, but â€" "

"But?"

Chopper's ears twitch as he frowns. "Itâ€™| it's _Luffy_ â€" but it's not, because that's not what he smells like. But maybeâ€™|?" His eyes drift downwards, locating the white sheath at Luffy's side with a contemplative expression; he is the second person to peer at the blade as if it may be something more.

"Luffy," Chopper says then, voice high-pitched and surprised. "Your sword has a _scent_."

All eyes turn to stare at WadÅ• Ichimonji.

The next slurp of Vivi's lemonade is deafening in the silence, but the princess and the captain are the only ones who laugh.

"There's a spirit in it," Luffy explains, and Chopper emits a noise of awe. "His name's Zoro. Sometimes he gives me an electric shock when he's grouchy."

"Electricâ€™|?" Chopper mutters, leaning closer to the hilt. He sniffs deeply and then pokes the blade like a wary animal; sparks flicker across its beautiful white shine in a miniature fireworks display, but the lights cause no harm even as Chopper rears back in shock.

"That's so _cool_! Can he understand us? Can he communicate in any other way? Is he a ghost? _Eiiiii_ Luffy â€" is he _dead_?"

Luffy laughs over the scrabbling sound of Nami and Usopp picking their jaws up from the deck.

"Yeah, he can hear us! And he talks to me too, though most of the time he's complaining about something. And I don't think he's dead, but I haven't asked! Hey-ey Zoro, you dead?"

_/_Dunno./_/_

"He's says 'dunno'," Luffy parrots, grinning broadly.

Usopp squeaks _that's comforting_, and the sun deck of the Merry descends into pandemonium.

* * *

><p>Are you going to learn how to use me?/_ Zoro asks that night. Dinner has passed, the crew's disbelief has passed, and now Luffy swings back and forth on his hammock, watching Chopper and Usopp

tumble around in preparation for bed.

"Not really," he says, as quietly as possible, trying not to disturb the crew. It's futile - Chopper twitches up towards him, little ears flicking at the sound, so Luffy just smiles and waves the scabbard about, explaining with motions almost as loud as his words.

Chopper smiles back. "Goodnight Zoro!" he says, giggling softly.

/Err. Night Chopper. And - err - Usopp/ the sword mumbles, and Luffy dutifully repeats it.

Usopp's stare is just as bewildered as Zoro's tone, but the sniper offers a mumbled _sleep well_ and then seems to question his choice of words with a deepening expression of astonishment.

/You should/ Zoro continues, once the lights of the cabin have dimmed. _/I'm powerful./_

"So am I," Luffy states. He stretches out across his back, one arm tucked beneath his head and the other cocooning WadA• Ichimonji at his side. He feels as if the blade is staring at him with the full weight of darkcharcoal eyes.

/I know. But I could help./

"Don't need your help. I can fight on my own."

Zoro heaves a sigh and grumbles under his breath with the frustration of one unwilling to let a matter lie. Yet, he doesn't say anything more for a moment, and when he does, he is quieter, his tone lighter with an almost uncertain tune.

/So why do you need me?/

Luffy picks his nose, seeming disinterested. Laughter rings out from the deck above, voices indistinguishable through the thick panelling and the roll of the waves, but the captain takes comfort in the sound. Sanji is on the first night watch tonight, he recalls, but he doubts they'll sail into any trouble until Alabasta is almost upon them.

"Ah," he says eventually, a sigh of content into the lazy evening. "I don't."

/Then â€" /

"But I like you," Luffy adds, laughing softly. "You're nakama."

And Zoro says â€"

/Oh./

Which isn't really the response that Luffy was going for â€" that is, had he the mindfulness to even consider eliciting particular reactions in other people.

"Oh?" he asks, hoping to draw out a more enthusiastic reaction.

/Okay/ Zoro says instead, sounding just as unsure.

Luffy frowns up at the ceiling, wondering if he has misjudged the sword spirit after all. Doesn't Zoro _want_ to be a part of this crew? Maybe hanging onto the blade had been a mistake; maybe Zoro doesn't like having his will taken from him just as Luffy doesn't.

/I take it I don't get a choice in the matter?/ Zoro asks then, complaining before Luffy can get another word in. Despite his grumbling tone, he doesn't _seem_ reluctant - or angry, or disheartened at his fate, but Luffy waits a moment to see if Zoro has anything else to say.

When it becomes clear that the sword is awaiting an answer, the captain smiles and replies in an excessively chipper tone:

"Nope! Why'd you want that?"

/Fair enough/ says Zoro, probably shrugging if he could. He still doesn't seem _enthusiastic_ _though_, and so Luffy is quiet for another moment; so quiet that the sword becomes restless, concerned at his side.

"I'd never make anyone stay, if they really didn't want to," the captain breathes eventually, soothing the sword's fretful air. He leaves the _that includes you_ unsaid, but it hangs heavy in the darkness, a guilty shadow flickering in the moonlight.

/Right/ says Zoro, somehow making it sounds like _you're dumb_ despite the glaring syntactic dissimilarities. _/Good thing none of us want to leave then, isn't it?/_

Relief shines magnificent on Luffy's face; he laughs, Zoro sighs, and Usopp rolls over and shushes the captain with a whine.

* * *

><p>At breakfast the following morning, Luffy bounds into the lounge and hollers ZORO'S CREW! at the top of his lungs instead of his usual greeting.

A spectrum of hours slept turn towards him, Vivi and Chopper exemplifying the two extremes of _nine hours_ and _what day is it?_ respectively, but the crew raise their eyebrows as a single entity as Luffy waves the scabbard about.

"Yes Luffy," they say, fond, exasperated, and amused. "We are aware."

Then Nami drags Luffy into his seat and the day begins as it always does - with breakfast, bickering, and a crew of eight happy together and ready for the adventures coming their way.

After the food is served, somebody has managed to drag Sanji into a seat at the table, and the crew have eaten their fill, Nami informs them that the kingdom of Alabasta is less than a day's sailing away. They decide to dock at Nanohana for supplies and then trek the desert towards Yuba, the rebel army's town. After a plan is devised and Vivi

reveals the functioning of the Baroque Works, the crew separate to prepare, each member buzzing with nerves in their own individual way.

Luffy sees little point in worrying, but he doesn't say anything. His crew have a lot on their minds, he is sure, and Vivi more than most, and though he is excited to explore Alabasta and give the Baroque Works a piece of his mind, he is far more interested in watching Sanji begin the dishes and pining for any leftovers from the cook.

Sanji lasts a noteworthy five seconds before throwing down the dishcloth and lighting a cigarette with a sigh, and Luffy blinks, dumbfounded by the cook's odd behaviour. The captain tilts his head, feeling his beloved hat scratch against his neck. Sanji doesn't appear inclined to offer any more food, and Luffy blinks some more when the cook whirls around with a sobering expression.

"Luffy," Sanji says, breathing out a smog of toxins into the kitchen. "Zoro," he then adds, but he isn't addressing the sword - no, Zoro is the topic of the conversation, not the recipient, and Luffy tilts his head the other way, sensing rather than hearing Zoro perk up at the sound of his name.

"He doesn't... need sustenance, right?"

"Eh?" Luffy says, taking a second to process such a large word. "Like what?"

"Blood," Sanji deadpans, single curly eyebrow asking *_really captain?_* He looks infuriated for a brief moment, rolling the cigarette between his fingers, but then he seems to shrink, grow smaller as if *_lesser_* is the only state he'll ever reach, and he adds with a muffled clarification of sincerity:

"Vitamins, Luffy, *_energy_*. I don't know - carbohydrates and *_proteins_*."

Sanji asks, *_what's keeping him alive?_*

Luffy hears, *_what's keeping him from dying?_* and almost reaches out to crush his silly, *_hurting_* cook into a hug.

"Zoro doesn't need food and stuff," he tries to reassure. "I've never given him anything."

"That doesn't mean he doesn't *_need_* anything," Sanji grumbles, but he seems to accept the captain's words somewhat, his shoulders losing some of their sharpness and slipping back into a slouch.

/Tell him I ain't corporeal enough need any of that shit./

Luffy does so, and then tacks on the end: "Does that mean Zoro doesn't sleep?"

/Wish I could./

"So - what? You just exist incessantly?" Sanji asks, looking distinctly more like himself now that he is assured that Zoro is not a mouth he is liable to feed.

_/_Dunno. Don't think so. I think the condition of the WadÅ• Ichimonji has stuff to do with it. Got really battered in a river once and I swear I lost some time somewhere. Can't be sure though. I haven't been damaged for a while./_

"Huh," Luffy says. "That means I have to look after Zoro?"

_/_Don't be ridiculous. I don't need anybody to look after me./_

This is clearly _not true_ if the WadÅ• Ichimonji's condition has a knock-on effect on Zoro, but Luffy doesn't argue the matter. Instead, he vows to find out how to care for a blade at the next best opportunity, and then lifts pleading eyes towards the cook beginning to clean the dishes once again.

"_No_," Sanji says vehemently.

Luffy whines and casts a hopefully glance towards the fridge. "Aww but Sanjiâ€|"

Sanji doesn't say any more, but an alarmingly menacing expression morphs onto his face (he's a cheetah, a puma, a lioness safeguarding her pride), and Luffy wilts under the stare.

"If you have nothing to do, go help Usopp catch me some fish," Sanji says, dismissing the captain with another puff of his cigarette. "If you reel it in, I might let you eat it."

"_Really?_"

"Maybe," Sanji amends. "Depends on what you catch, doesn't it?"

Luffy hurtles out of the lounge to locate a fishing rod, and half an hour later he crashes back in through the door, an astonishingly pink and blubbering man dangling off the end of the hook.

"HEY, HEY SANJI. LOOK WHAT I CAUGHT."

Sanji kicks them both out onto the deck, and the rest of the crew begin to scream.

"What on earth -?"

"Luffy is - IS THAT A MAN?"

"EIIIIII HE'S STILL ALIVE."

"Untangle him from the line, quickly!"

Eccentric doesn't quite begin to cover the stranger's fashion sense (but it definitely covers his personality) and the man thanks them profoundly as he wrings out his candy pink cardigan. He introduces himself only by his Devil Fruit, a Paramecia-type which grants him the ability to assume the appearance of anybody he touches, which seems harmless enough until the man's cremates appear on the horizon, shouting for _Mr. 2._

Bon Clay springs away, cackling gleefully, and Luffy turns to each of

his own crew in turn, taking in their expressions of shock.

"Luffy, you are _ridiculous!_" Nami snaps, shaking a fist at him. "What are we going to do now? He could impersonate any one of us!"

"I'm sorry!" Luffy whines, cradling his head pre-emptively. "He seemed cool!"

"Something edible would've been cooler," Sanji grumbles, scrubbing a hand over his face.

"Does this mean I don't get any meat?" Luffy asks, pouting at the cook's fierce expression. He isn't nearly as scary as Nami, and Luffy isn't above diving behind Sanji for protection from the fury of his navigator.

"What the hell do you think?" the cook snaps.

Luffy pouts.

/Stingy/ says Zoro. _/But hey, Luffy, tell everyone to calm down, for god's sake. There's a simple countermeasure to that guy's Devil Fruit./_

Curious, the captain calls for quiet with a brief announcement that Zoro has a solution, and the crew fall silent as if Luffy had shouted, immediately and unanimously ceasing their arguments to listen.

/Right/ the sword says, sounding somewhat overwhelmed by the undivided attention of the crew. _/Listen up.../_

They agree that the double-layered safeguard is a good idea, and soon they are dashing about to find the necessary equipment. Just minutes later, the cross and bandages have been implemented and the crew are sharing expressions of relief; even Carue quacks happily as Sanji smooths down his feathers and ties the bandage tight.

"I told you that Zoro was sensible!" Luffy cheers, chuffed with the katana's foresight. "Now we don't have anything to worry about!"

"Other than Crocodile and all of the Baroque Work's highest ranking officers, you mean," Nami says, but she is shaking her head, smiling despite her pessimistic disposition.

"I'm sure everything will go smoothly, my Nami-san!" Sanji sings.

"Yeah!" Luffy adds brightly. "What could go wrong?"

Nami rolls her eyes, but either at Sanji's antics or their combined optimism, it cannot be determined. "_Everything_ goes wrong with you, Luffy, but at least Zoro can keep you in line, I suppose. You hear me, Zoro?"

The spirit takes a moment to reply, stumbling over his words as he always seems to whenever any of the crew address him directly. Luffy isn't sure that it's shyness that compels Zoro to falter anymore, but

rather a surprise at being spoken to - or included, or being considered a presence in the room (or on the ship) at all.

_/_Yeah I hear ya./_

Luffy relays the message, and as Nami nods her assent to the first mate's vow, he wonders if it could ever be possible for Zoro to converse with his nakama directly.

He hums, taps the hilt of the blade, and then decides not to worry about it for now.

* * *

><p>At Nanohana, Luffy runs into Ace.<p>

Quite literally.

They do not chat long - in fact, they don't talk at all until the Merry is on her way, but Luffy is glad to see his brother nonetheless. Ace is all grins and laughter as usual, teasing and protective at once, and when he offers Luffy a position on Whitebeard's crew, the Straw Hat pirate laughs in his face.

"I've got my own crew!" Luffy says, motioning to the people around him. "And I'm going to be the Pirate King!"

Ace doesn't look so sure, but he laughs along with his little brother, taking pride in Luffy's achievements all the same.

He offers a scrap of paper as a parting gift, explaining it vaguely. Luffy vows to hang onto it anyway, and Nami stitches it into his hat once the Whitebeard Commander has disembarked the Merry and lit the sea in flames.

"Your brother's kinda awesome," Usopp says, nodding approvingly. "Do you think he'll find this 'Blackbeard' guy?"

"'Course he will!" Luffy says, oblivious to the grim frown that had taken shape on his brother's face as he had scorched the seas apart. "He's Ace!"

* * *

><p>Crocodile is a man more violent and unpredictable than they ever could have imagined.<p>

When he leaps into the sand to face an opponent he knows nothing about beyond cruelty, fear, and a name, Luffy tells his crew _I'll be all right!_

When death is down, down, _down_ into the earth and there is no-one there to help him - no crew, no allies, not even his sword, not even his _first mate_ ripped away by a hand and hook of blood and Crocodile's malevolent, sand-spitting laughter, still Luffy refuses to accept this as the end. He scrambles and reaches and he fights and he fights and he _fights_, but the sky overturns and the desert tsunamis like a golden, breathless sea; Luffy roars, bellows like a Pirate King, and then loses himself in a tomb of a kingdom and sand.

But the Will of the D is a powerful thing.

Robin brushes down his beloved hat and sets it on his head, commenting slowly about a force Luffy is yet to understand and motives he probably never will, and then smiles with a smile of all-seeing eyes and all-knowing tongues, and continues on her way.

She takes the WadÅ• Ichimonji with her. _For proof_ _of your death,_ she'll say later, sipping a drink of pineapple affection from the Merry's upper decking. Crocodile will have lost, Vivi will have remained in the kingdom she loves, and Robin will have smiled her way onto the Straw Hat crew with pleasantries of secrets and knives. She'll clarify no further, offering no explanation to the captain and the sword hanging at his side, just as she does now, saying nothing more as she leaves Luffy to lie sun-kissed and burnt face up in the sand.

He doesn't stay down for long.

He takes the WadÅ• Ichimonji back just as he takes back Alabasta, with all the strength he can muster and the eyes of the devil cast out to the King's horizon, Raftel and gold. Robin is less of an enemy but not quite a friend, but Luffy pulls her from the wreckage nevertheless, and then doesn't try to stop her when she slips away.

It's not trust - not yet.

Luffy cannot claim to understand the archaeologist, her motives, or her ways, but he cannot claim to understand his nakama either, complex and conflicted individuals as they are. This does not make him love them any less, just as it will not make him love Robin any less once she finds her place amongst the Straw Hat crew. But she is not crew - not yet - so Luffy's priorities lie elsewhere as he picks himself up from the ground and revels in the patter of rain against his skin.

"You there Zoro?"

/Yeah/ the spirit says quietly, muffled, as though he has been asleep for an age - which is impossible, Luffy knows, just as he doesn't know everything there is about Zoro._ /That dick was a piece of work./_

He means Crocodile; he means,_ you okay?_

Luffy laughs an affirmation, pulling up his hat to protect his hair from the rain. Water floods the city around him, engulfing the people in a promise of prosperity and mirth. His hat doesn't do much to keep him dry, but Luffy's heart belongs to the sky's stormy tide just as it belongs to the sea, so he doesn't really mind.

His crew are equally nonchalant about the downpour, although Sanji struggles to light a cigarette and Chopper's fur is thick, dog-like, and damp. Nami and Usopp both relish the rain as if it can wash away their pain, the violet trophies of their victory that splodge and splatter their skin, but it is Vivi who laughs and cries and cheers with her people, and celebrates out in the streets long after the

storm has re-quenched the land.

As for the Straw Hats - they sleep. Days drift past unceasing, but tucked away deep into the palace, the crew dream on unstirred. Alabasta begins to rebuild itself around their slumber, slowly, carefully, a new world climbing up out of the sand - but truly, it is not their concern. Vivi comes and goes, ever busy within the palace, but she visits the sleeping crew when she can, when her royal duties allow a moment to slip away to a life she could have known. At Luffy's bedside, she sits for minutes or hours on end, sometimes with food in the hope that he will wake, but he is the last of the pirate crew to rise into the Alabasta dawn. The others are unconcerned, used to Luffy's all-or-nothing outlook on life, his energy, his ways and means, and entertain themselves with exploring the palace as they await their captain's orders.

Only Zoro does not stray from Luffy's side, but even if he could, even if physics and biology allowed, perhaps he wouldn't after all.

When the shores of Alabasta are behind them, midday sunshine rolling down into the Merry's jolly-rogered sail, Vivi is not with them. Queen-to-be, she wishes them well with waves and tears, crying out from the highlands, and the Straw Hat crew respond in kind, lifting 'X' marked arms up to the sun.

Luffy goes as far as swinging the WadÅ• Ichimonji in farewell, and even Zoro finds it in himself to laugh.

* * *

><p>End notes: Please leave a review as you go!

2. Chapter 2

****Notes****: Onwards with chapter two! :)

* * *

><p>our shores of starlight (come sailing in)

**** - II - ****

A lightning storm, a lightning storm

>Can even happen when the air is warm
And I can hear that nothing calling out to me

>I can feel that nothing reaching out for me

>- Kasper; Sea Wolf<p>

* * *

><p>Robin accepts Zoro's presence with little more than a soft noise of curiosity and a laborious sweep of her novel's next page - deliberate, maybe thoughtfully so - which is remarkably better than how Zoro takes Robin's presence on the ship, at any rate.<p>

The rest of the crew are edgy only for hours, a day and night; Chopper is the first to approach the wayward archaeologist, mumbling about _files_ and _check-ups_ and peering at her hopefully from

beneath the rim of his hat, and Robin goes uncomplaining into the doctor's realm. Nami and Usopp both seem to abort motions to follow, distrust or protectiveness urging them on, but neither decide to move once the door to the lounge clicks shut. Perhaps this is because Sanji is in the kitchen, rather than any trust for their new crewmate, but either way, Luffy reclines back on Merry's head and is pleased by the sounds of his nakama continuing their work.

Breakfast the following morning is less of an awkward affair than it has been, but with the Straw Hats at the table and food all around, it is still an affair of noteworthy proportions. Robin is quiet unless pulled into conversation, but small smiles and watching eyes seems to be her perpetual state, so Luffy isn't concerned. Zoro, conversely, has only become more withdrawn since Alabasta, muttering less and keeping his silence more. Luffy worries but doesn't know what to say: with Zoro's solemnity it is easy to forget he is even there - his quiet hinders his animation; without a physical, tangible, perceivable form, he becomes but a sword to the crew, even if they do not mean to view him this way.

After realising this, Luffy takes to addressing Zoro with a voice slightly louder than necessary, hoping to draw not only the spirit, but his friends into conversation, and then finds himself astonished when it is Robin who first responds to the captain's call.

"Captain, if I may," she begins one afternoon, which is how she begins most of her conversation with Luffy - almost hesitantly, if I may. It is a bright, brilliant day, and so is Luffy's smile when he bounds across the deck to where Robin is seated and enjoying her tea-time meal, and they both look surprised but for entirely different reasons.

"When you converse with our resident sword spirit, do you imagine a material form beyond that of the WadÅ• Ichimonji's blade?"

Plonking himself down in the chair opposite, Luffy shakes his head at the question. Behind them, noises of Nami gardening and tending to her beloved trees continue, and the laughter between Chopper and Usopp as they hang out the washing carries far across the deck.

"Would he perhaps prefer to manifest a tangible form?" Robin continues. She offers the plate of biscuits to the captain, and Luffy quickly munches through two, licking crumbs from his cheek. "There are reports and legends of particularly powerful spirits achieving some manner of corporeality; they are vague on the methods of doing so, but I thought it something that he may wish to consider attempting given his place amongst the crew."

She pauses momentarily to thank Sanji as he appears with a coffee refill. Luffy uses the lull (the flurry, to be more accurate, given the cook's joyous proclamations) to mentally prod Zoro, checking his awareness.

"Zoro looks like a human - right?" he asks, wondering if that's what Robin means. How Zoro came to be isn't something they have conversed before, but Luffy recognises that this may be due to their chatting consisting mostly of the present and future, rather than the woes of past and old. Prying into his nakamas' business is not Luffy's place; he is their captain, not their keeper, and their pasts are their

own.

_/Not sure/ _says Zoro, and Luffy immediately parrots his words, uncertainty and all. _/I think I was human, once, but not anymore. I can't really remember what I look like - it's not like I have easy access to mirrors you know./_

"I'm sure we could procure a mirror from somewhere on the ship," Robin says.

"Yeah!" Luffy cheers. "Sanji'll have one!"

"What? No I don't," the cook denies, glowering an incredulous expression at the captain. One spiralled eyebrow creases downwards, deepening Sanji's affront, and Luffy winces at the sight of it.

Robin laughs, the tittering sound serving to lessen some of Sanji's anger. Torn between scowling at his captain and fussing over the archaeologist, he seems to wobble in place for a moment before his need to praise Robin's lamenting laugh wins out.

Luffy pouts - but now that his obligation has been fulfilled, Sanji has no qualms against turning his ire towards the captain:

"And anyway, the mirror's a moot point if he can't materialise himself. You should worry about that first."

"Yeah, we should!" Luffy agrees, placing a happy, _heavy_ emphasis on the pronoun. "Everyone can help out! It'll be like an adventure!"

/It's nothing like an adventure./

Deciding that this is simply _wrong,_ Luffy doesn't repeat that aloud.

"Zoro isn't exactly the weirdest thing to ever happen to us," Sanji says, unknowingly agreeing to the spirit's self-deprecating mumble.

"Zoro's not weird," Luffy argues.

Sanji's eye roll is a skillful integration of fond and exasperated. Maybe if his other eye were visible it would be clear what he is trying to convey. "That is _exactly_ my point."

/I think I just got complimented./

"I think this is a delightful idea," Robin says, encouraging the conversation away from Sanji's temper. Turning to the katana now, she appraises it beyond its beautiful and shine. "Have you ever attempted to materialise yourself before, Zoro-san?"

/Eh, once or twice. But it's hard. I haven't worked out how to do it./

"_Eh_?" Luffy blurts, rounding on the sword. He almost knees the table in his haste, threatening the array of plates and saucers that Sanji has lovingly laid there. "Zoro's tried before?"

The spirit mumbles something indiscernible, likely the verbal equivalent of blushing in embarrassment. _/Yeah, well/_ he says, hushed under Luffy's wide-eyed stare._ /It didn't do much at the time soâ€¦ Talking's easier, I guess./_

Despite its impossibility, Zoro seems to emit an air of having just shrugged. Luffy answers with a wondrous noise, wracking his brain for when he may have seen Zoro attempt to make himself more physical. Nothing comes to mind beyond a flash of something - like lightning, but green, like the earth rising up and deep, quaking laughter of forests and caverns and all things arcane as shorelines and gold. It's not a human figure by any means, but the sensation is so irrefutably _Zoro_ that Luffy can only assume that he has perceived the sword spirit on some _nearly_ tangible level before.

But when? As Luffy unwittingly scooped up the Wad  Ichimonji for the first time?

Robin makes a thoughtful sound and begins to swish her coffee as if the swirl of bitter umber and burnt sienna can spell out sagacious notions to consume. "If I am correct in my presumption that others have wielded the Wad  Ichimonji before our captain here, Zoro-san, have you ever spoken to any of your  _ah_. Forgive me, I cannot think of a more acceptable word than -"

The Wad  Ichimonji sparks, firecrackers of light spitting against the table. A brilliant ember scorches Robin's shirt, but a hand brushes it away in an untroubled bloom of petals and dark Devil Fruit skin. Sanji emits a protesting noise and tries to bat the lightning away with the silver tray he carries, but Luffy, bothered only by the rush of _unease_ from the katana's spirit, rubs a rubber thumb over the hilt of the blade.

/No/ Zoro grumbles. _/No one's heard me before./_

"No one but _Luffy_?" Sanji blurts, still clutching the tray. He seems doubtful of the concept, overwrought, and is unabashed at questioning Zoro's word. "How many people have had the Wad  Ichimonji?"

/Dunno. Loads. Not all of them used me though./

"The blade was in my possession briefly and I could not hear you," Robin notes, her tone the absentminded of one piecing together a puzzle of evidence, thoughts, and circumstances laid beyond them.

/Didn't want to you/ Zoro replies, unapologetic. Luffy phrases the words a little nicer, but Robin seems to comprehend the spirit's reluctance nonetheless.

"So I could - theoretically?" she asks, unconcerned by the hostility.

/I don't know, all right? I don't try and talk to everyone who picks me up./

"Why not?" Luffy asks.

/Waste of time, isn't it?/ Zoro snaps, growling the words. He sighs then, long and heavy, and the WadÅ• Ichimonji seems to glow for a moment, a sky warning of a storm ahead. Luffy opens his mouth to reply - to argue, question, _deny_ - but Zoro cuts off further attempts at conversation by barking: _/Are you done badgering me now?/_

Luffy relents, unwilling to push with Zoro so disinclined. His abrupt quiet causes an eyebrow raise or two from Robin and Sanji, and the captain thinks of laughing it off before changing his mind and shaking his head.

"Zoro's not happy," is what he supplies instead, _feeling_ rather than hearing the spirit withdraw.

"Yes, that does seem to be the case," Robin replies, direct as though she is entirely apathetic to this. She sips her coffee, adding, "It must be a lonely existence," which seems to be all she has to say on the matter for now.

Sanji glances one-eyed at the captain - or the sword, maybe - and then pats his pockets in search of a cigarette. He tucks the tray under one arm so that he can light it, then colours faintly when Chopper appears at the top of the stairs and scrunches his nose at the smell.

The little doctor blushes too, but makes his way over without commenting on Sanji's unhealthy habit. Something else is bothering him, if his nervy approach and wide, coal-black eyes are anything to go by; Luffy leans down to ruffle Chopper's fur, glad and guilty for the distraction.

Only, Chopper diverts the conversation back towards Zoro's gruff reluctance.

"Is there something wrong?" he asks, peering up at the captain from beneath his bubblegum-pink hat. "You all smellâ€¦ uneasy. Is there anything I can do to help? I want to help. What can I do?"

Luffy blinks at the doctor's keen perception, and then blinds Chopper's watery eyes with a smile. "Zoro's a bit sad," he says simply, sliding the sheath from its place at his side. "I think he could do with a hug from someone small, and cute, and _really_ fluffy. D'you think there's someone on the ship that could do that?"

"I could!" Chopper chimes, perking up hopefully. "I mean - only if you think I'm fluffy enough to meet the criteria -"

Luffy laughs, passing WadÅ• Ichimonji into the reindeer's caring hooves. "If he gets all grouchy at you, just use your secret weapon, yeah?" the captain says, patting Chopper's hat.

"My secret weapon?"

"Uh-huh. He's weak to your big eyes and your cute little nose."

"_Really_?" Chopper gasps, looking between Luffy and Robin for confirmation, and Sanji, having not quite slunk out of earshot,

almost inhales his cigarette. He coughs, hacking around a lungful of smoke, and wheezes something that sounds suspiciously like '_puppy-dog eyes_' before retreating across the deck.

"Oh, it wouldn't surprise me," Robin says, smiling down at the awed doctor as he clutches the blade close to his chest.

Luffy merely laughs.

* * *

><p>"Luffy, why do you have my compact mirror?"

Ceasing his silly expressions at the glass and snapping the little mirror shut, Luffy flops his head back over the side of the sofa to spy Nami standing there, hands pressing firm into her hips. He grins at her upside-down fury, wondering if her frown had always been so large, and watches as the navigator's diamond gaze flicks from his face, to the mirror, and back to his smile again.

"We wanna know what Zoro looks like," is what Luffy says by way of explanation, still grinning even as Nami huffs and scoops his elasticated head back into a more acceptable position.

"Who's 'we'?" she asks, motioning for the mirror. "And why that does that involve _you_ going through _my_ stuff?"

"Sanji said he didn't have one," Luffy replies, obediently handing the object over. He has been uncharacteristically careful with it, ensuring no dents or harm befell it - he made sure - but Nami checks her possession with a critical eye anyway.

"Well Sanji's a _liar_," she says, laughing shortly. "That doesn't mean you can go through my things though."

Luffy whines, thoroughly chided under her glare. "Sorry Nami," he says, pouting pathetically at the compact mirror. If _neither_ _Sanji_ nor Nami let him use their mirrors, how is he going to find one for Zoro?

Nami sighs heavily, softening at her captain's disheartened expression. She rolls the circular mirror in her hands, seeming to contemplate giving it back. Eventually she sags, tension rolling out of her shoulders. "Alright, spill. What's this got to do with Zoro? And where is he anyway?"

"Chopper's giving him a hug. We were talking about how it would be cool if Zoro could be physical so that everyone could see and hear him and stuff, but Zoro got all sad and grumpy 'cause he said that he hadn't spoken to anyone before and Robin said he was lonely."

"Zoro can physically manifest himself? Wait - wait -" She shakes her head, cutting off Luffy's immediate reply, and then sits down beside him on the sofa. The captain scrambles to make room for her, flinging his rubber legs out of the way.

"He hasn't spoken to anyone _at all_?" Nami asks then, trouble tugging her pale and freckled features into a frown.

"Nu-uh. Just me, he said."

"And soâ€¦ the mirrorâ€¦?"

"Zoro said he can't remember what he looks like, so if he could manifest himself then he could use the mirror to find out!"

"Right," Nami says, considering her captain's enthusiastic expression before appearing to come to a decision. "Right."

She hands back the mirror.

Luffy fumbles with the object for a moment before cocking his head in question, as though just realising what he holds. Nami shrugs as she returns to busying herself about the lounge, glancing - or not glancing - at Luffy pointedly.

"Guess he'll be needing it then, won't he?" she says. "But you break it and I'll throw you overboard, hear me?"

"Hear you," Luffy replies, and captain and navigator share a grin.

* * *

><p>News spreads faster than wildfire about the Merry; by dinner that night, everybody is aware of the first mate's predicament. Chatter around the table is full of supernatural talk and ambiguously helpful suggestions on how to further Zoro's corporeality, and even the spirit himself is encouraged by the crew's unanimous determination to bring this change about.<p>

The crew - bar Luffy - take turns handling the blade to lay Zoro's doubts that they won't be able to hear him to rest: they can't, as it turns out, as they are disappointed to find, although Usopp claims to hear something when awkwardly cradling the sword. Sanji mumbles about imagination and placebos and dutifully returns to serving drinks, but Usopp's frown is a little too deep and Zoro's curious noise is a little too thoughtful, and Luffy wonders if his sniper lied at all.

At any least, Zoro seemed to have expected the crew's selective deafness, merely shrugging their apologies off with a huff and a sigh. He sounds pleased (touched, even) that they even tried, and if Luffy holds the WadÅ• Ichimonji closer than usual for the rest of the meal, then his nakama say nothing about it at all.

"Zoro wants to be corporeal, right?" Luffy asks later; an afterthought, almost, as he wipes a cloth along the WadÅ• Ichimonji's blade with a careful hand. Chaka had shown him how to maintain a katana back in Alabasta, happy to provide the necessary equipment and knowledge after Vivi's concerns, but Luffy has never been any good at cleaning. The first time he had tried, Luffy had knocked a whole bottle of oil across the deck and Usopp, who had volunteered to oversee the operation, had almost lost three fingers and his nose as the WadÅ• Ichimonji slipped out of their hands. Nami had not been impressed at their antics (but then, she rarely is), grilling them relentlessly about their stupidity while Chopper fussed, fretted, and rushed around for plasters; Sanji had stood behind her looking equally disapproving, but Luffy had heard him laughing at Usopp's terrified squawking.

Luffy's following attempt at cleaning the katana had been more of a success, but that was probably only because Nami refused to let him reattempt it without supervision. Bravely, Usopp had agreed to help again, but the navigator hadn't been appeased until Robin sweet-talked a promise into keeping an eye on them. Apparently, the entire cleaning process is possible one-handed, the katana never meant to touch the floor, but Luffy has found that he can do very few things one-handed. Fortunately, with Robin watching from the upper deck, the captain had the means to use both of his hands while her Devil Fruit ability kept the WadÅ• Ichimonji levitated over his knees.

Since then, Luffy hasn't gotten much better at the actual cleaning process, but at least no one is in danger of losing their fingers.

/If it's possible, then sure/ Zoro says.

"Doesn't Zoro think it's possible?"

/Well I've never managed it before, have I? You'd think I could have done it by now./

Luffy isn't sure about that, doubting that Zoro ever had the incentive to achieve corporeality when nobody could hear him, but he says nothing. He is reluctant to bring up Zoro's solitary existence again - at least, to Zoro anyway - so he just makes a thoughtful noise and puts aside the cloth, picking up the marshmallow-like uchiko ball instead.

/What?/

"I didn't say anything," Luffy says, whistling innocently. At Zoro's replying silence, the captain clamps his tongue back between his teeth, methodically tapping the uchiko ball against the blade.

/I can hear you thinking./

"Really?"

/Not literally, idiot./

Luffy emits a disappointed sound but doesn't share his thoughts, and Zoro huffs, submitting to the blatant deflection.

/You missed a spot/ he says after a moment.

"No I didn't! Where?"

/Near your hand. Look closer./

Sceptical, Luffy takes the blade from Robin's extra hands. The limbs sway for a second like two fleshy, grotesque flowers, and then disappear in a burst of petals as Luffy lifts the katana up to his face. He can't see any obvious damage, but Zoro is the sword, he supposes, and so Zoro knows best, squinting his eyes to inspect it further.

The katana flares, light exploding from its polished edge, and Luffy's shriek to the high heavens is so loud that crashes resound

around the Merry, the crew simultaneously catapulting from their lazy afternoon in surprise.

Stunned, Luffy lays sprawled on the deck for a long moment, ears echoing with the howl of Zoro's laughter.

Nami berates the sword later, unable to fine him for the ink she had spilled, and Sanji's disapproval is sincere this time as he threatens to impale the sword with the remains of a shattered glass, but Chopper is the only one who receives a grumbled apology, his fur still sticky with whatever concoction he had been trying to mix.

"Zoro's mean," Luffy says with a smile, completely unfazed by the trick.

The sword replies with a low chuckle, sounding equally unmoved by the severity of Nami and Sanji's threats.

/Your face was worth it./

Luffy is sure it was. "What about Chopper's though? He looked pretty angry."

He looked like a kicked puppy, truthfully, because Chopper doesn't _do_ angry, and Zoro makes an uncomfortable sound.

/Eh, I wouldn't worry. He'll probably just add another tally to the list./

"What list?"

Zoro's voice drops, embarrassed. _/Err/ _he replies, mumbling with the tone of a man regretting his life decisions. /_He has a 'hugs Zoro owes me when he's tangible' list. I think he's trying to condition me or something./_

"With hugs?" Luffy laughs, taking great delight in Zoro's mortified groan. "That doesn't sound so bad!"

Grumbling under his breath, Zoro doesn't seem to agree.

/He threatened to use heavy point./

"_Ooh_, I hope he does!" Luffy says, entirely unsympathetic to the sword's plight. He tries to imagine Chopper scooping Zoro's physical representation into a bear hug, but with so little information to go on, only images of WadÅ• Ichimonji come to mind. Luffy doubles over with laughter anyway, desperate for such a collision between his cutest and gruffest nakama.

/Stop laughing./

"But it's funny! Can you imagine -?"

/Yes/ Zoro sighs, cutting him off. _/I can./_

* * *

><p>Their journey beckons them upwards, the log pose reaching to the

sky. Nami says you have got to be joking and demands they cast a vote before throwing themselves into the will of the Grand Line: Luffy, Robin, and, albeit grudgingly, Sanji vote for Skypiea, leaving the decision at a tie.

"Zoro can decide!" Luffy declares, still wringing water out from his shirt after the deep-sea dive. He feels sodden and uncomfortable but won't let that dissuade him, and he supposes even now, on the safety of the Merry, the sea hates him with the vengeance that pulls the tides.

Nami gives him the look and argues, "Zoro's thoughts and opinions are pretty skewed through your mouth, Luffy."

"I won't lie!" he replies, more amused than offended at his navigator's doubt. She's as keen as ever, and brash enough to feel unashamed for calling him out, and Luffy is pleased to know that the line between captain and crew is so easily ignored. "Swear it!"

Nami's eyes only narrow. Luffy stares back, grin open and free, and the rest of the crew begin to make uncertain, amused, and mildly irritated little noises.

"Zoro-san," Robin says, dismissing rather than interrupting the confrontation unfolding across the deck. "If you would be so kind as to cast your vote; perhaps a spark of that lightning of yours for 'yes to Skypiea', and nothing for 'no'?"

"Wait," Usopp says, after the WadÅ• Ichimonji crackles and flares and Luffy cheers wildly; Nami, burying exasperation in her hands, groans loudly. "Zoro can produce lightning, can't he?"

"Yeah!" the captain says, swinging the blade up over his head as Robin clarifies: "We have yet to discuss the process behind the phenomenon, but yes, this appears to be the case."

"Isn't it cool?" Luffy breathes.

"No - well, yeah - I mean -" Usopp shakes his head, raven curls bouncing as he tries to find the words. "He could communicate with it, couldn't he? He just answered a 'yes/no' question; it's not much, but he could talk to us?"

As one, the crew blink, and then turn their attention to the katana being paraded over their heads.

"But Luffy's the only one made of rubberâ€¦!" Chopper points out, pondering the idea with a sad little smile. "Wouldn't it hurt - to hold him if he did that?"

"I doubt Zoro's stupid enough to electrocute us while we're holding him," Sanji says, patting the reindeer on the head. It is probably meant to be reassuring, and Chopper does perk up under the affection, but the cook's grumbling tone doesn't resonance with the rest of the crew.

"I dunno," Nami says, mumbling under her breath. "He did just vote for Skypiea."

"Then all we have to do is not carry the WadÅ• Ichimonji around, right? I mean, Luffy's basically the only one who carries it - he, Zoro - anyway, and Zoro can still hear us." Usopp presses, glancing between them all. He shrugs at the concordant uncertainty, looking faintly embarrassed now. "It was just an idea."

"It's a good idea!" Luffy bellows, enthusiasm soothing his crew's concerns. "You should all definitely talk to Zoro."

"One spark for 'yes'; two for 'no'?" Sanji suggests as the crew shrug, accepting this turnabout of events. "Can Zoro even control it to that degree?"

The WadÅ• Ichimonji flares once, crackling briefly in Luffy's hand - and then again, in quick succession, like tiny white fireworks scattering down the sheath.

"Soâ€¦ was that a 'yes' or a 'no'?" Usopp asks.

"I believe that was Zoro-san merely proving a point," Robin explains. "Perhaps we should explore the possibilities this brings at a later date? It would be advantageous to expand the vocabulary that Zoro can convey, especially if a physical manifestation becomes something beyond his reach."

"You mean like a code?" Nami asks, adopting an expression as thoughtful as Robin's. The two women seem to share a moment, or a message, each humming as though concurring to a plan. "We could probably come up with something."

/I could work with that/_ Zoro agrees, sparking once for the benefit of the rest of the crew. /But I thought we were going to Skypiea for now?/_

"YEAH!" Luffy roars, his seemingly unexplained yell making his nakama jump. They grumble, clutching their chests, and only Robin laughs at the novelty of the holler. "LET'S GO TO SKYPIEA!"

* * *

><p>"You know what?" Sanji says, patting the torn and frayed pockets of his jacket for a packet of cigarettes. His hands shake as he shoves a cigarette in-between his teeth, but compared to the rest of his aching joints and bones, they have remained relatively unscathed. Refusing to function until he curses at it, the lighter clicks sweet relief into his lungs, the first sharp inhale ebbing away some of the pain. Then, the cook peers at his watching captain from behind a sticky, bloodied fringe, and Luffy grins back.<p>

"This was a terrible idea."

Luffy snickers. From the back of the boat and the only member currently rowing, Usopp joins the conversation with a long, drawn-out whine.

"Even my eyelashes hurt, Luffy. I hope the others are okay because I think I'm coming down with -"

"I think this place is great!" Luffy says, as though the number of bruises he has acquired positively correlates to how much fun he is

having. "I'm sure the others are having a great time!"

Usopp doesn't seem to agree. "But they were _kidnapped._"

"Yeah," Luffy says, laughing, because he _knows_ that.
"And?"

"People don't usually have a good time when they're kidnapped. I should know, there was this one time when I was seven - no, eight -!"

"Nami-san and Robin-san better be okay," Sanji says, not really interrupting but rather, speaking over Usopp's fabricated memory, one single curly eyebrow scowling darkly. "If so much as _one_ hair on their heads -"

"They're with Merry right?" Usopp says, sitting up sharply in a burst of confidence. Lie forgotten, he hastens to exhibit some bravado.
"Surely they'll be fine as long as they don't stray farâ€¦!"

That idea is so preposterous that Luffy _wheezes_ with laughter; over his head, the cook and sniper exchange a pointed glance.

"Right," Usopp murmurs, shaking his head in disbelief. "Of _course_ they wouldn't do that."

Yet not even the Merry is safe in this forest, as they are dismayed to discover upon regrouping with their missing nakama. The stench of smoke lingers heavy in the air, sorrowful grey and scorching black over their heads, and Luffy runs his fingers along the ship's banister, wincing at the charred splinters beneath his skin.

Chopper wails as he explains the fight that took place. His hat is crooked, the top singed like a campfire marshmallow, and clumps of his fur are scattered around the deck. It is a grisly scene, and Luffy isn't the only one frowning as they survey the damage to the Merry.

They decide to camp out away from the ship, reluctant to allow any more harm to befall her. Luffy is glad to have his nakama reunited, even if two are worse off for wear; Chopper insists that he's fine, but still allows the crew to fuss over him in turn. When the night rolls in through the swamp, the reindeer has curled half-asleep on Luffy's lap, and it is now that their bellies are full and a fire roars before them, that the Straw Hat pirates return to talk to Skypiea and gold.

Robin explains how they discovered that Jaya and Skypiea, together, form the treasure map skull they've been searching for, and Zoro chips in occasionally with his own interpretation of the events.

/It wasn't that big of a deal/ he says, when the archaeologist explains how they couldn't communicate with him without receiving electrical shocks. Only this morning they had proposed a temporary solution to Zoro's transcendence, but it relies so heavily on Luffy's presence that their unforeseen separation seems to have thrown a spanner in the works.

They'll have to think of something else, Luffy supposes, drumming his

fingers against the WadÅ• Ichimonji's scabbard. His other hand continues fluffing up Chopper's fur, much to the doctor's sleepy delight, and the captain prods Zoro to see if he's listening to the reindeer's adorable crooning.

"If nothing else, this is an incentive to try and achieve a more tangible form," Robin says, sipping a cup of some herbal, poignant tea; Sanji's own infusion. She never seems to be without a mug of something lovingly prepared, be it coffee, tea, or any of the other brews Sanji experiments with, and Luffy has no idea how she manages to consume so much caffeine without needing the bathroom every two minutes.

_/It's not like you were listening to me anyway/ _Zoro grumbles, and when Luffy repeats it with high, curious eyebrows, the rest of the scouting party - that is, Robin and Nami - laugh.

"That's because you're directionally _hopeless_," the navigator argues, wiping a tear from her eye. "I've never met someone capable of getting lost in a _straight line _before."

"Really?" Usopp asks, as Sanji cracks a grin beside him.

"It is quite remarkable," Robin notes.

"Every time we went in the right direction, he kicked up a fuss," Nami adds for the benefit of the others, still sniggering as she recalls what was sure to have been a long, winding adventure through the forest. Luffy has no doubt that what they're saying is true, already witness to the peculiarities of Zoro's internal compass, and he laughs along with them at the katana's expense.

/I did not kick up a fuss! You were going in the wrong direction!/

"_Right_. And _who's _the navigator here?"

/Ah shut up./

Nami barks a laugh, ginger hair spilling from the elastic tie. "No, _you_ shut up," she retorts, squabbling back at the katana as an older sister would, berating the misbehaviour of their younger brother.

Sanji, predictably, takes offense on her behalf, which Luffy still thinks is all sorts of ridiculous given that she's perfectly capable of beating anybody she wants into the ground. "Hey! Don't you tell Nami-san to 'shut up'!"

Less predictably, Zoro seems to take offense in turn. _/You picking a fight curly-brow?/_ he snaps, and Luffy only thinks to paraphrase the insult _after_ Sanji glows red with outrage.

"_What_ did you just say?"

Now unwilling to repeat the rest of Zoro's derogatory reply, Luffy smacks his lips together, staring wide, innocent eyes at the protesting cook.

"Sanji," Usopp squeaks, as if Sanji's temper is truly something to be

afraid of. "You're yelling at a sword."

"Yeah, and it's hilarious," Nami says.

"Oh I know there's a thick-headed arsehole in there somewhere!" Sanji growls, clambering to his feet with none of his usual grace. For a man so light on his feet in battle, he can be so awfully heavy footed at times. "Come out here and I'll show you a fight you scatter-brained -"

The WadÅ• Ichimonji doesn't so much as spark in warning before combusting into a smog of white light and searing, opal flames. Luffy flings the sword away from him - away from Chopper, dozy and unprotected by an enduring rubber skin - and throws a hand out to stop Sanji in his tracks as a thunderstorm explodes within the camp.

Sure of nothing but the snap of electricity in the air, for a second Luffy thinks he sees a figure, an arm, a flash of sea green and a large hand cut with scars lunging out -

And Sanji jerks back, falling hard out of reach; Nami shrieks, jumping up, and Robin's Devil Fruit blooms to protect them from the blitz of ashes and cinders raining down. Usopp yells, shielding his eyes, and Chopper ducks under Luffy's arm; the white lightning and fire pouring from the blade snuffs out like a candle, and the WadÅ• Ichimonji clatters to the earth.

Luffy breathes out, puffing shock and condensation into the night. The campfire spits once, then twice, and begins to smoke as the last of its embers crackle and die. Silence swallows the camp, thick, obscure darkness settling upon them in the aftermath of the storm.

Robin's Devil Fruit hands flutter away.

"What - the hell?" Nami breathes. Part of her hair is singed, the fiery strands up in flames. She extinguishes it with clammy hands, her staggered expression rapidly morphing into anger.

"Have I lost my eyebrows?" Usopp pipes.

"Don't even mention your eyebrows," Sanji growls, propping himself up on his elbows. Dirt covers his hands from where he skidded on the ground, but he is unharmed enough to glower as he climbs to his feet.

Luffy heaves a relieved sigh, and then peeks under his arm to check Chopper for any damage. Uncontrolled or not (or whatever that explosion had been), Luffy knows that Zoro would never forgive himself if Chopper, more than anyone, came to harm.

"Chopper's okay? Everyone's okay?"

Various confirmations resound back at him. Sanji, because he's protective, brave, and stupid, stalks over and scoops up the WadÅ• Ichimonji to give it a piece of his mind.

"What was that? Are you stupid, asshole? Someone could've gotten seriously hurt! Oi Zoro, are you listening to me? Hey -!"

Nami snatches the katana and says to it in a low, haunting voice, "Never do that again," before lobbing the scabbard over to Luffy.

"That was insane," Usopp says, the sound of his thundering heart evident in his wavering tone.

"Yes, that was quite a shock," Robin says, amusing only herself with the joke.

"Is Zoro okay?" Chopper asks, unhesitating as he reaches out and lays a hoof against the sheath in Luffy's hand.

Luffy has absolutely no idea, but when prompted, their gruffest, lightning-throwing nakama doesn't respond. Concerned, he draws the blade to check for any damage - although, the lightning has never self-inflicted the WadÅ• Ichimonji with damage before - but there's nothing that he can see, the daitÅ• katana as sharp as ever as it catches the moonlight glow.

He sheathes the blade, hating that there is nothing he can do.

"So, did anyone else seeâ€|?" Sanji begins, after a terse moment in which the crew seem to succumb to their own thoughts. Having already lit a cigarette and smoking it so furiously that he might as well be eating it, he is now attempting to get the campfire going again. Robin blooms two hands to help him, and Sanji smiles so brightly that it could probably illuminate the entire clearing.

"See what?" Usopp asks, scrubbing at his goggles as though this will improve his past-self's vision.

Sanji shrugs as the fire clicks and sparks to life. Smoke begins to billow up into his face, obscuring his expression from view. "Dunno. Thought I saw Zoro for a second, but it was hard to tell with all the light."

"I saw him too!" Luffy exclaims, perking up. He grins at his nakamas' startled expressions, he and Sanji apparently being the only to lay eyes on Zoro's semi-tangible form, but then pouts as he recalls the sword's subsequent silence. "But he's not saying anything now."

Sanji sits back, rolling the cigarette between his fingers. "Probably sulking," he says, unconcerned.

"He might be hurt," Chopper argues, rising to the katana's defence. His fur ruffles up as he springs from Luffy's lap, but the captain scoops him back in as Chopper's worry gets the best of him: "And what if he is? How am I supposed to treat him? I've checked all my textbooks, but there's nothing about this!"

"I think we were more at risk," Usopp says, trying to soothe the doctor. "It was like that lightning-bolt - the one back at Angel Island. I can't even imagine what it might be like to get hit by that."

"Let's not find out," Sanji grumbles.

"Lightning-bolt?" Chopper asks, sounding just as frantic as before.

"Yeah, apparently the people of Angel Island have this God dude - Enel, or something - who throws lightning at them if they speak out against him or betray him in any fashion," Usopp explains in a softer tone, clearly realising that his attempt at distracting the doctor has done a terrible job. "He almost killed Conis - but she's okay! - but there was just this _huge_ lightning strike and|"

He trails off with a shrug, looking quite uncomfortable with the memory. Luffy can empathise, remembering the crash of light and energy and the way the air itself had seemed to crackle, electrostatic sparks flickering in the aftermath.

"That's awful," Nami says. "No wonder everyone's terrified."

Luffy frowns, unsettled by the comparison that his crew are implying between Zoro and Skypiea's God. He doubts they mean it in earnest, but he finds himself speaking up anyway: "Zoro's nothing like that. It was probably an accident."

"Perhaps the release of energy is a by-product of Zoro-san attempting to manifest himself," Robin speculates, as the rest of the crew mentally backtrack the conversation to correct their blunder. "We should take note of any more occurrences like this as he tries again."

"Hang on, what about that crazy storm back on Loguetown?" Sanji asks.

Usopp clicks his fingers and makes an _oh yeah!_ noise of comprehension. "That can't have been natural, right? Nami?"

The navigator shakes her auburn head, indicating that it hadn't been. "It was too specific, even for weather that close to the Grand Line. We've not seen anything else like it, and nothing like that has been reported in East Blue before."

The conversation is momentarily interrupted by the splashing of Robin pouring herself another drink, but directing attention towards herself may have been the archaeologist's intention. "What happened?" she prompts, offering the teapot to the crew.

Sanji takes it from her with a show, setting it back by the fire, then points over to the captain and grumbles, "Idiot over there almost got himself killed -"

"I was almost executed!" Luffy clarifies, gleeful despite Chopper and Robin's astonishment.

"- but this thunderstorm came out of nowhere and saved him."

"And you had Wad| Ichimonji on you, at the time?" Robin asks.

Luffy wracks his brain, thinking back to Loguetown, the streets paved with gold, and the cold press of the execution block against his throat. Unsure, he vaguely recalls the sensation of somebody at his side, perhaps reaching over him, shielding him, but the memory is hazy with the thundering of the execution stand crumbling around

him.

"Yeah, I think so? I couldn't reach it because of the handcuffs."

"Didn't the lightning come from the sky, though?" Usopp ponders, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Zoro's seems to come from his blade."

To answer this question, the crew turn as one to Nami.

She rolls her eyes. "Ground to cloud strikes can occur, but they're rarer. But it wasn't a natural occurrence anyway; thunderstorms can dissipate quickly, but I'm talking half an hour, not under a minute. The cloud's life cycle must have been sped up - and there _was_ a cloud. But Zoro can't produce those either."

"Unless they're - like - really small," Luffy says, enjoying the idea of a train of little clouds bobbing out of the WadÅ• Ichimonji.

She gives him _the look_.

"That'd be really cool!" Chopper says, enthused by the same mental image.

Nami gives him _the look_ too, but a notably less severe one.

"Is Zoro a sword or a Clima-tact," Sanji deadpans. He discards the remains of his cigarette and then reaches for the packet, contemplating another one.

"Whatever he is, he's definitely an idiot," Nami says. "You hear that, Zoro?"

Luffy blinks, waiting, but not a word is spoken by the first mate. Feeling helpless, he shrugs at his navigator, acutely aware of how his crew all frown at Zoro's persistent silence. With the WadÅ• Ichimonji impeccable and without a verbal response from Zoro, they have no way of gaining insight into his well-being. Zoro _could_ be sulking, angry, or blaming himself for what happened, _or_ he could be hurt, or unaware, or perhaps even trying to say something but it is _Luffy_ that cannot hear, and they have no way of knowing.

That's a failing as a captain, if nothing else.

* * *

><p>Somebody fixes the Merry overnight, their work uninterrupted by the fog, the crew's snores, and the yawning, sleepy rotations of the night watch. Clanging fills the drawn-out hours, the ones the living never see, but the Straw Hat pirates sleep on unaware - and Luffy, deeper than most.<p>

He dreams.

His eyes are gold again; his smile is lightning sharp. He walks along a path of green that ripples as he steps, emerald roils of waves that sway and cascade out to sea. Skypiea's skyline flashes above him, cotton-candy cloud torn only by a silhouette against the sun; the Going Merry, he realises, watching it sail past overhead. Grinning up

at it, he reaches out as though even rubber can stretch that far, and notes with some surprise that scars bestrew his hand. His palm aches with cuts and scabs, and bruises violet and yellow seep beneath the damaged skin, and it looks as though the blood has stained his hand forever, whoever's it may be.

"Can you speak?" somebody calls, speaking from so far away that he may as well be listening to the stars, may as well be talking back to the sun and all its resplendent, freckled hues. "Can you tell me your name?"

He tilts his head, glaring up at the clouds as they glimmer atop the wind. The sky they hide is ocean greens and blues, a mirror of the ground below. He thinks that's such a stupid question and opens his mouth to say "â€"

* * *

><p>"Zoro, are you any good at cutting through rock?" Luffy asks, peers at the katana expectantly. It's a bit of a long shot - he doesn't *think* swords are made for carving through mountainsides - but he can't think of any other way of escaping this weird, lukewarm, surprisingly pungent cave.

He waits a moment for a reply, then waits a moment more, and when it becomes apparent that Zoro's silence still persists, Luffy smacks his lips together and casts his gaze back out across the cave. The walls are a strange, fleshy colour, and he has hit them more times than he can count, but still they stand unbroken and strong, occasionally oozing a substance that squelches when he touches it.

"Would you be mad if I tried cutting it anyway?" Luffy continues, appraising the thickness of the walls. The WadÅ• Ichimonji has proven itself pretty sharp, but he worries about causing an excessive amount of damage: a sword, after all, is replaceable, but a nakama is not.

A huff puffs his fringe from his face. Risking his nakama is the one thing he will not do, so Luffy figures he'll just have to locate another way out, or wait for one of his crew to come searching for their wayward captain.

He hopes to locate the former but ultimately bumps into the latter, although Nami is just as surprised as he when she plummets from seemingly nowhere and crashes into one of the many heaps of gold that seem to be lying around.

Caves are a good place to hide gold, Luffy knows, although he had always thought that burying it was part of the process.

"How have I ended up with a captain too stupid to realise he's been eaten by a snake," Nami despairs, notably after she does a double take and squeals at the goblets and coins scattered about. Her anger is somewhat mollified by the gleeful shine to her eyes; enough so that Luffy dares to ask the most obvious question between them:

"When was I eaten by a snake?"

Nami wails into the pile of gold. "Why me," she cries, apparently

not expecting an answer when she adds: "Why can't Zoro be corporeal? Then he can deal with all of this."

Luffy has been sailing with Nami long enough to know that asking all of what will probably get him killed.

The list of things that are likely to cause him irreversible harm only increases once they manage to escape the python's digestive system ("Hey Nami, look at that giant snake!"), but Enel, as it turns out, is not one of them. Traversing God's territory throws them up through the clouds and then back down to earth again; Enel's lightning is an overpowering force, a careless hand ripping open the sky, but Luffy will not be deterred. A promise to ring the golden bell was made, and he is going to avenge his fallen nakama, protect the ones still standing, and strike Skypiea's ancient bell even if it kills him.

"Hey, hey Nami," Luffy says, drawing his navigator's attention away from the humongous beanstalk climbing up into the sky. Exhausted, his nakama are slumped around him, some more worse for wear than others (Sanji - relentless, ridiculous, kind-hearted Sanji - had been still for a minute too long before gasping, wheezing, and spluttering into Death's retreating face; it is a minute Luffy will never get back, just as it is one Sanji will never realise he lost). They're all okay, or they will be, and they all deserve their rest now, so Luffy plonks his hat on top of his head and looks up through the skyline, daring God and Enel to come thundering down.

"What's that thing people say?" he asks, smiling at Nami's weary smile. "Oh! We should fight lightning with lightning - right? We could do that!"

"Fire, Luffy," she despairs; Usopp gives a weak chuckle from where he is slouched against the base of the beanstalk. "You fight fire with fire, not lightning. You'll need to find something that doesn't conduct electricity to fight Enel."

"Eh?" Luffy replies, trying not to show his disappointment. He doesn't have any fire, which is a shame. "Like what?"

/Like rubber?/_

The WadÅ• Ichimonji flares, pulsing blue, but Luffy's resulting squawk is pitched high with flabbergast, not pain. "Zoro! HEY!" he bellows, wrenching the WadÅ• Ichimonji from his belt loop and scrutinising its beautiful sparks. "You're awake! Where have you been? ARE YOU OKAY? You were really quiet and we were all really worried - oh yeah! Hey Nami, I conduct electricity, don't I?"

"Wha - no, Luffy," Nami says, shaking her head in what could be a fond manner as the captain and first mate reunite. Her expression suggests a desire to give Zoro a piece of her own mind, but relief seems to win out with a roll of her eyes. "Rubber insulates electricity."

Luffy halts his exuberant yelling to make a thoughtful sound. "Is that a good thing?"

/That's a good thing/_ Zoro rumbles, just as Nami blurts, "Oh my

god_ - rubber, Luffy! You're made of _rubber_. Your Devil Fruit actually has a _use_ for something!"

"Hey, it has lots of uses! Look - see, I can even stretch my _"

"_Finish that sentence and I will end you._"

He whines. "But look - !"

"_No_, stop it, I don't want a demonstra - _LUFFY_!"

* * *

><p>Luffy does not believe in Fate. If he wants something he fights for it, and nobody - not coincidence, not chance, and not even probability - will stand in his way. Thus, he believes it not Fate that thwarts Enel's supremacy, but a people in riot and a God's single mistake; an Achilles heel in the form of a king with the heart of a pirate.

Legends will say otherwise, but truly, Luffy cares little for those too. He cares for his nakama, his dream and theirs, and he wants only the greatest of adventures in the time he has sailing under the sun.

(But perhaps the Will of the D is not something to be denied after all).

* * *

><p>Merry doesn't make it. Water 7 becomes a grave of fire: the World Government flag lights up in flames. The Sogeking comes and goes, a brave masked man bound by a friendship that he cannot let go, and Usopp returns to them, in the end, because Luffy has chosen his crew and he'll be damned before letting any of them slip away.<p>

Robin cries. She spends the Thousand Sunny's maiden voyage cooped up in the library organising her books, speaking to no one but history and his voices printed in tomes. At a loss for what to do, Luffy sits by the door to offer something of a presence, comfort, or a guard, and though the archaeologist doesn't once emerge throughout the day, he wonders if it helps to know that he is here. Sanji is the only other crewmember to venture into Robin's space; he brings her coffee occasionally, only to have to leave it by the door, and though Luffy accepts that Robin wishes for time to collect herself, he has to put his foot down when the cook works himself into distress.

They eat lunch together, all three of them, sitting out in the corridor and not saying a word. Robin's skin is smudged with ink and Luffy's back is sore from immobility, but the sandwiches are delightful and there is solace in the quiet, and when Luffy whines for meat and Sanji threatens to kick him overboard, Robin laughs as if she means it, her eyes crinkled with mirth.

She leaves the library door open for the rest of the day, but it is, in fact, only Franky that wanders into the bibliophilic realm. Electric blue hair with a personality to match, there is no doubt that Franky is well suited for their crew. His love for the Sunny is admirable, a true reflection of Usopp's compassion towards the Merry

and all that she had represented, and he is proud to introduce the crew to the many quirks of their new lion-headed ship. Robin is no exception, and so Franky coaxes her out of the library before dinner to provide a grand tour of what the Sunny has to offer.

If the tour just happens to pass every single member of the crew, if the crew just happen to have their own ways of reassuring the archaeologist (reassuring themselves that she's fine), and if Robin notices their fretful behaviour, then she says nothing about it - not even at dinner, when she re-joins the crew at her place at the table.

The Thousand Sunny, herself, has plenty to offer to the crew. Built from Franky's heart and soul, she is a ship worthy of sailing the world, and the Straw Hat pirates adore her. Nami's beloved tangerine trees survived the relocation, and now there is abundance of secluded, peaceful places for her to study her maps. Usopp has a workshop of his own, a lively, colourful studio tucked away in the lower deck of the ship, and Sanji has a kitchen polished with marble worktops and with space enough for him to adorn it with smells and tastes and masterpieces of his affections. An infirmary for Chopper, new storage spaces, little hideaways, and corners for each of the crew to call their own are things they've always needed, but Franky's work is above and beyond anything they could have imagined.

There's even a gym in the crow's nest - for Zoro-bro, when he needs it_, the shipwright explains, and Luffy swoops the gigantic cyborg into a hug at the sheer perfection of the ship that they have already come to love.

"Don't thank me, thank the Sunny," Franky says, patting the ship proudly with a metallic hand. "She's just as excited about seeing the world as you are. She's been waiting for this."

Luffy beams. "Then let's get going!" he cheers, bellowing out over the deck. "Hey, hey Nami! How long till Fishman Island? Can we go any faster? When will we get there?"

Franky laughs at the navigator's exasperated sigh, but Luffy is undeterred as he vaults across the deck, rubber swinging low like the great arms of a monkey.

"We get there when we get there," Nami says, twirling a lock of hair from her face. She holds the Log Pose up for him to see, the little needle twitching and shaking but determinedly pointing onwards. "We need to get through the Florian Triangle first, which will take some time. You know, we talked about this before setting sail."

Luffy taps the delicate glass orbs, mesmerised as the compass spins. "Ah," he says, laughing to himself as Nami glowers a warning at him. He tucks his hands into his pockets, remembering what happened with the last Log Pose. "We did? I was talking to Zoro."

The navigator sighs and seems to decide that arguing with him isn't worth it. "Where is he anyway? I take it he hasn't gotten any further with manifesting himself?"

Luffy shakes his head. "Nu-uh, we haven't really spoken about it since Skypiea. I think he's worried about giving off all that lightning again. He's with Usopp at the moment."

"Usopp's got some really neat ideas about trying to contain all that electricity," Franky interrupts, calling up from the grassy deck of the Sunny. "He said he was gonna try use the Dials you got from Skypiea. We're trying to think of ways of harnessing the energy Zoro releases too, which would be super~!"

"Didn't the Ark Maxim run on Thunder Dials?" Nami asks, looking from the shipwright, to the captain, and then back again. "He has one of those?"

"Nah, but he's got other types - like Flash Dials and Flame Dials. They're really super. We should be able to modify them. Might take a few days though."

"There's plenty of time before we reach Fishman Island," Nami says. "Having Zoro capable of manifesting before we reach the New World would be ideal - we're still a pretty small crew after all."

Franky shoots her a 'thumbs up', blue hair seeming to gleam. "Suuuuper! We'll see what we can do. It's not fair that Zoro-bro is stuck inside a sword all day."

"YEAH," Luffy exclaims, pumping his fists into the air. His nakama are the greatest; with their help, he's certain that their wayward sword spirit will achieve corporeality soon enough. It's about time Zoro experienced life amongst the Straw Hats to the fullest, sleeping and eating and partying and all. "Zoro can come along on our next adventure!"

* * *

><p>Usopp and Franky scarcely leave the lower deck over the next few days, and after Luffy's first - and only - attempt at assisting their research, the two shipwrights restrict entrance to the workshop to a need to be here basis. The rest of the crew are sympathetic to Luffy's whining - you almost killed yourself with nothing more than a pot of paint, Nami reminds him, threatening the moping captain into submission with a compass. Robin laughs, wishing she had witnessed the mayhem, but even Chopper seems wary of allowing the bouncy captain into his beloved workspace. The kitchen soon becomes one of the few areas on the ship that Luffy is allowed to come and go as he pleases, but this is probably due to Sanji's no-nonsense attitude about kicking the captain through a wall rather than any real sympathy.

On the odd occasion that Franky and Usopp emerge for more than five minutes at a time - at mealtimes, lest they face Sanji's wrath, and during the lingering hours of daylight as they stumble into bed - Luffy is quick to reunite himself with the WadÅ• Ichimonji. So accustomed to having the blade knocking against his thighs as he is, lounging around the Sunny without it digging into all his uncomfortable places is bizarre. He hadn't realised quite how attached he's become to the katana's presence, and Luffy admits as such to Zoro when he rescues the blade from their shipwright's colossal hands.

Only, instead of being equally entertained (or as Luffy maybe, secretly hopes for just a little bit, embarrassed by the declaration) Zoro adopts the moment of pensive silence that seems to

befall him whenever one of the crew address him directly. Quiet though the spirit may be most of the time - even at Luffy's side, commenting only when necessary, grumbling a complaint only as Luffy mocks and teases - this is a strange sort of hush, and one with a cause that the captain is still helpless to determine. It reminds him dreadfully of Nami's solitary bravado, of Sanji's muted subservience, and Robin's desperate sense of longing for happiness, to belong - only, those are things that Luffy has challenged, dared to counter, stood against. How can he fight for Zoro when there isn't a pirate to defeat, a home to leave, or a World Government to confront and light up what hurts his nakama in flames?

/D'you want to keep it?/

Just as thrown by the question as he is by Zoro's soft tone, Luffy does nothing more than stare at the WadÅ• Ichimonji for a moment, trying to scan the blank white of the sheath for answers. While the crew have commented that Zoro's existence must be a solitary one (most of his nakama have, in fact, pulled Luffy aside at one point or another asking after Zoro's well-being - from Sanji's concerns over food to Nami's question of _how long did he say he'd been in that sword exactly?_) it is Luffy who has had the most intimate insight into the extent to which Zoro is probably _not okay_.

That doesn't mean he knows what Zoro's going on about though.

"Is it going to go somewhere when Zoro appears?" he asks, confused as to why the continued existence of the WadÅ• Ichimonji is in question. Why would he not keep it, he wonders; he's aware that it has a large monetary value, recalling that confrontation with the clumsy marine, but selling it has never been something Luffy has considered - nor will it ever be.

_/No/ _Zoro replies. _/I hope not./_

"That's good right?" Luffy asks, trying his hardest to articulate _?__? _with his eyebrows, human vocabulary limited by syntax and sense._ "This is a nice sword. I like this sword."

/Yeah/ Zoro says, slowly voicing a sound as baffled as the captain's. _Yeah_ is not a particularly telling response - yeah _what_? - and Luffy blinks, convinced they're having two entirely different conversations.

"I like Zoro more though," the captain continues, trying not to dwell on his confusion. "I like it when you're around! I'd rather have you than a sword. I dunno how to use it anyway!"

He laughs, recalling his hazardous attempts at wielding the blade. There's certainly a level of elegance required to master the art of swordsmanship, and Luffy doubts he'll ever acquire it, rubber and bruises and ceaseless, boundless energy as he is.

The spirit seems unfazed by the concept - that, or he snatches up the topic detour so fast that he doesn't have time to be.

/I could teach you./

"Eh? Wouldn't that be weird for Zoro?" Luffy asks, trying to imagine receiving instruction from the very blade he learns to use. Teaching

swordsmanship must be difficult enough without the complication of having the sensei doubling as the sword, after all, and his mind conjures images of embarrassment and chaos as he considers the logic.

/Well - /

"_Wait_," Luffy interrupts, a breathless shout of realisation. "Zoro can _teach_?"

/I couldâ€|? If you wanted to learn./

"You know how to use a sword?"

/Err, yeah. I am a swordsman./

Luffy doesn't so much as _brighten_ at this declaration as _combust_ into the world's smallest, happiest star_.

_/I think/ _Zoro quickly adds - and did Luffy imagine that wincing breath or not? _/I mean.../_

He huffs out in frustration, pushing back a fringe of scruffy hair if it were possible._ /Why the hell'd you want me to be corporeal?/_

"You're nakama," Luffy declares, because that _is_ a question he can answer. "And Zoro wants to be corporeal right? So it shouldn't matter what I want."

/Wha - yes it does! How am I supposed to be real without you?/

Luffy's _?__?_ expression threatens to make a return, but he suppresses it with the realisation that his first mate's outcry is in earnest. "Zoro's already real."

/Yeah well tell that to everyone else who ever fucking used me!/

Sparks crackle along the sheath, Zoro's anguish a deafening ring in Luffy's ears. The scabbard _cracks_ against the floorboards as he startles, drops it, squawks and fumbles to catch it before it clatters across the men's quarters. Skin against sheath, connection restored, both captain and first mate blurt apologies - and Zoro, then, a plea.

/Fuck, sorry. Sorry, I - please - /

There is a knock at the door before Usopp's head of curls ducks into the room. His frown lifts away as he spots Luffy and the WadÅ•. Ichimonji, only to return again as the captain clutches the blade closer to his chest.

"Nu-uh," Luffy says, rubber limbs seeming to swallow the length of the sword. Though not unkind, his expression is fierce as he addresses the frazzled sharpshooter. "Zoro needs to stay with me for a while."

To his credit, Usopp doesn't comment on the captain's clingy

behaviour. "Err, okay, well Franky and I are going to be in the workshop if Zoro's feeling up to it laterâ€|?"

/I can go now/ Zoro mumbles, snatching up the opportunity to escape the repercussions of his awkward confession.

"Later," Luffy declares.

Zoro grumbles an unhappy sound, his voice rising in volume, increasing in stubbornness. _/There's nothing to talk about./_

"Uh-uh, yes there is," the other replies, drumming his fingers against the katana's sheath. He frowns, uneasy with Zoro's reluctance, but Luffy can be just as stubborn and he refuses to let this go.

/Great/ Zoro snaps. _/So you gonna make me?/_

That's a sucker punch of a statement if Luffy ever heard one, but it serves to calm the captain rather than coax him into arguing. Realising his hypocrisy and deflating with long, heavy sigh, Luffy rubs the scabbard in an absent, soothing motion, and then turns to the sniper still hovering in the doorway.

Usopp squeaks as though he has done something wrong, so Luffy is quick to reassure him too, brightening the quarters with a smile.

"Zoro wants to go with you," he explains, stretching his arms out to pass the WadÅ• Ichimonji to the surprised sniper. Usopp accepts it carefully, holding the blade as though it were his Kabuto, or a possession just as prized.

Luffy's smile slips - just a little.

"He'll be tangible long before you know it!" Usopp exclaims, nodding encouragingly in the face of the captain's blues. "Robin's really smart, and Chopper's working hard, and Franky and I can definitely build something to help! We promise."

And then, to Zoro he repeats, "Promise," before spluttering red-faced at Luffy's _beaming_ grin.

"YEAH!" Luffy roars, launching himself into the air. His hat scratches against his neck, but he throws his arms up undeterred. "That's 'cause my nakama are the BEST."

* * *

><p>Luffy fails to coax Zoro into enough of a conversation over the following few days to even begin attempting to unravel whatever is plaguing the spirit, but unlike their moping, huffing captain, Franky and Usopp have far more luck with their objective.

This becomes apparent one afternoon as the Sunny bobs along the outskirts of the Florian Triangle. Grey omens are the skies ahead, sunless days promised in fog and murky waters. Unfazed by the lurking haze, the crew busy themselves with fighting boredom as their merry

ship approaches the uncertain sea. Luffy is eager for adventure, desperate for it, but he knows that sometimes there is nothing to be done except sit, and wait, and occasionally thrash Sanji at cards.

"You cannot have knocked already," the cook despairs, growling at Luffy's hidden hand. "I swear, if you get thirty-one again -"

Luffy lays down an ace and two queens and Sanji throws his cards into the captain's face.

"Face it Sanji-kun, he's got the luck of the devil," Nami says, winking at Luffy's innocent grin. "Maybe we should spend a little time in a casino on the next island."

"Oooh that could be fun!"

"Pretty sure you have to be eighteen to go into a casino," Sanji says, shooting down Luffy's glee with an apathetic click of his lighter. The captain whines and slumps against the table, and the cook huffs out a mouthful of smoke as he laughs.

"We're pirates," Nami argues, gathering up the deck of cards to deal another game. "We could sneak him in no problem. Now come on Luffy, I'll teach you how to play something more complicated. And could I bother you for another tea, Sanji-kun?"

Luffy perks up as the navigator begins to deal the cards across the table. She shuffles the deck with far more skill than Sanji, her hands faster, the motions automatic and controlled, and the captain smiles as Nami lets him cut the cards. Sanji returns just as she begins to explain the rules, and as he flourishes a steaming cup of tea before her, the entire ship seems to rumble - the decking quakes beneath their feet, lights flicker, spark, and sizzle, and the pots and pans in the kitchen clatter together as though trembling in fear.

Yelling rises up from the lower deck.

Luffy rockets through the ship, unheeding of Sanji's squawking confusion and Nami's fiery curse as she launches to her feet. Smoke clogs the corridor to Usopp's workshop, billowing up from the cracks in the door, and Luffy wrenches it open just as Franky does the same from the other side, one of his great, robotic hands waving away the smoke as he coughs and hacks and - laughs.

"Whoa, Straw Hat, your first mate packs a punch!"

Nami thunders into the corridor, almost crashing into Luffy in her haste. Sanji is hot on her heels, cigarette forgone for a frenzied expression as he takes in the sight of the charred workshop and Franky's singed hair.

"What happened?" Nami wheezes, squinting into the smoke. "Shit, you've got a fire extinguisher down here, right?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah," Franky reassures, still smiling even as the sound of Usopp unloading one of the extinguishers onto the room gushes and splatters behind him. "I guess one of the dials overloaded - heya Usopp, anything left of it?"

Thankfully wearing goggles and thick, fire-proof gloves, the sniper ceases his clean up for a moment to present the remains of the dial. Indistinguishable now, its blackened edges crumble in his grasp, but the two creators only seem thrilled by the fragile remains.

"Everyone okay?" Luffy asks, not sharing the sentiment. Recalling the WadÅ• Ichimonji's explosion on Skypiea, he ducks under Franky's arm to further inspect the damage to the workshop. "Zoro's okay too?"

"I think so," Usopp says, reaching to where the katana is propped against the workbench. The scabbard itself looks untouched, gleaming like new despite the catastrophe around it, and Usopp's padded gloves hold the blade in a stark, grimy contrast.

"Yeah, he's okay," the sniper says, holding out the katana for the captain's taking. Luffy blinks in astonishment and then blinks again as Usopp laughs at something only he seems to hear before adding, "Don't be ridiculous, we're fine!"

"What," Luffy says.

"What," the sniper returns, eyes growing wide with realisation. Jaw dropping with disbelief, he stares at the WadÅ• Ichimonji's beautiful sheath before crying a sound of wondrous laughter, dark curls bouncing as excitement overwhelms his expression of bemusement.

"I can hear him!" he exclaims, drawing the attention of the rest of the room. "Zoro, I can hear you! Say something else!"

There is a moment in which Luffy can hear nothing but the sounds of Nami, Sanji, and Franky's confusion before Usopp practically starts to buzz with glee.

"I know! I know! Yeah, d'you think the others - ? Hey Franky, catch!"

The shipwright whirls around just in time to catch the WadÅ• Ichimonji. Like Usopp before him, he stares at the blade for a moment, and Luffy can only wonder if he, too, seems so briefly distant from the world around him whenever he converses with the sword's lonely spirit.

"Whoa! This is super!" Franky says, safety goggles glinting in the light of his smile. "You got any damage that we should be worried about, Zoro-bro? No? Suuuuuuper~! It's good to finally hear you!"

He throws the katana onwards, and Sanji fumbles as it bashes into his chest.

"What did you do?" Nami asks, staring in wonder as even Sanji emits a disbelieving noise and begins a startled chat with the sword. "You're modifying the Flash Dials, right?"

"Yeah, we were testing how much of Zoro's electricity they could hold, but I guess it got a little out of hand?" Usopp replies, scratching his nose and laughing nervously. "We're going to need a better stabilising agent, and maybe a way to channel the energyâ€¦|?"

We were thinking that if we could help Zoro control or contain the massive amounts of energy he releases, he might be more willing to attempt materialising himself? 'Cause he should, of course. But I get why he's reluctant and all."

"Oi, Luffy," Sanji calls, holding out the katana. Nami swipes it before the captain can, but Sanji is unperturbed. "He says he's tired. I thought he couldn't sleep?"

Luffy shakes his head, worried still for his first mate, but less so now that the explosion seems to have done so harm. He accepts the katana gladly, feeling its warmth from where the crew have held it. "He can't. But he did go really quiet back on Skypiea, like he wasn't really there or something?"

"Could be a side effect of releasing a tonne of energy," Franky suggests. "Energy can't be created or destroyed and all that. It has to come from somewhere."

"Maybe he should talk to Chopper?" Usopp says. "We'll have to tidy up in here anyway before we can do anything else."

Luffy nods, agreeing with the idea, and slides the blade into place at his side. "Is that okay with Zoro?" he asks, resting a hand on the hilt.

/Yeah, whatever/ Zoro replies - and then to Luffy's astonishment, he heaves a great, roaring yawn.

Chopper doesn't have an explanation for this, as they find, but it should be noted that the doctor isn't looking very hard through his textbooks as he explains as such, instead enthralled by the sound of Zoro's voice in his ears. Robin joined them in the infirmary once she had heard the news, but Chopper has yet to relinquish his hold on the katana to allow her the opportunity to speak to Zoro herself. Like Luffy, she appears amused enough to let Chopper have his way, instead seeming quite content to watch the tiny doctor wiggle his blue nose and endlessly fuss over the sprit within the sword.

"Just because I can't see you, doesn't mean I don't know when you're hiding something from me Roronoa Zoro," Chopper warns, looking quite adorable as he waggles a pen at the katana. "Have you had persistent headaches? Feeling nauseous? Sore throat? Can you even have a sore throat? Can you even have a _headache_?"

Robin laughs and scribbles something else down in her puzzle book. Crosswords are beyond Luffy, but the archaeologist makes time even in the busiest of days to solve a problem or two. The rest of the crew can often be heard calling suggestions to her from all manner of places over the ship.

"I should think this has greatly boosted our first mate's confidence in achieving corporeality," Robin says, tapping the puzzle book absentmindedly.

"You think so?" Luffy asks, hoping she is right.

"I'm certain," she says, going to jot something else down, only to pause at Chopper's affronted screech:

"What do you mean 'how the hell would you treat me'? I'd just - I'd just - _EIIIIIII oh my GOD how would I treat you_!?"

The doctor spins wildly towards the captain and archaeologist, his frazzled expression begging for suggestions, but only Robin is kind enough to attempt to smother her laugh.

"Chopper'll come up with something 'cause he's the best!" Luffy says, grinning broadly.

Chopper's ears droop, and Luffy doesn't have to be holding the WadÅ• Ichimonji to know that Zoro emits a soft, wounded sound.

"I don't know," worries the doctor, casting an anxious glance at the sword. "How am I supposed to run tests? If he's sick, I can't give him medicine, or food, or herbs. What about if the WadÅ• Ichimonji is damaged? Zoro, what am I going to do then? Do you just heal?"

Yes, says the spirit, although Luffy doesn't hear him.

"But how?" Chopper wails. "What do you do? How long does it take? Do you feel pain? I'm a doctor; I should be able to help!"

His tirade lapses for a moment as Zoro speaks, and then the reindeer quite promptly begins to gush, squealing and giggling over whatever the spirit has said.

"Ah, shut up you bastard, that doesn't make me feel any better."

He hugs the sheath tighter, burying it in his fur, and then continues to make happy little noises that lead his nakama to smile and look away, the moment almost too intimate for their watchful eyes.

Robin flips a page of her book. "I think it will only be a matter of time before Zoro-san walks amongst us," she says, as Luffy nods along in agreement, straw hat bouncing with his enthusiasm. "Our next adventure will surely be something to remember, don't you think?"

* * *

><p>Zoro doesn't quite dream - but then neither does Luffy, that night, star-fishing from a coast of golden foam.<p>

The rod is all his aspirations, the line his hopes to lure the sea. The basket beside him is empty, a night well spent as the lure bobs within the waves, dancing through reflections of the stars.

He's never caught anything, but that's okay.

The tide sails in anyway.

* * *

><p>The ship they discover sailing the empty sea is in a tragic state, loved once but no more, the bare skeleton of a ship drifting ceaseless to its grave, and the man who they find there is one of the same. He introduces himself as Brook, tipping his moth-eaten top hat towards them, and makes a tinkering chime of a laugh at Luffy's dazzled smile, his impossible body of bone clinking together to sing a merry tune.<p>

"Join our crew!" Luffy says without delay; he knows nothing of this man, not his reasons, his goals, nor even how he has come to be, but if any crew should have a living skeleton amongst it, then surely it should be the Pirate King's?

Nami and Sanji are quick to voice their concerns (but perhaps their plan of preventing Luffy from doing anything ridiculous was naive of them), but it is Zoro who speaks up and solidifies the captain's will.

/He's lonely./

Luffy nods and pats the katana's hilt, his decision made.

"What d'ya say?" he asks the skeleton, causing his opposing nakama to groan. Nami wails dramatically, folding herself over the ship's banister as though Luffy's brashness has destroyed all of her strength.

"Oh my," Brook replies, taking the crew of misfits in stride. "I would be honoured! But to whom should I be addressing as my crew?"

Luffy laughs and leaps forward, capturing the tottering man in a hug. Brook exclaims in surprise and almost loses his balance, but the rubber man grabs his bony hands and tugs him along, excitement spewing four dozen words from his mouth: "I'm Monkey D. Luffy! This is Sanji and Nami. Sanji's my cook, and Nami's my navigator! And Zoro's my first mate, and he's a sword spirit. He says 'hello'. You can chat with him later though, he'd like that. Come on, come on, d'you wanna see the Sunny?"

/When did I say that./

"Everyone'll be really excited to meet you!" Luffy continues, ignoring Zoro's sigh. "Is that a sword? Are you a swordsman? That's really neat! Zoro's a swordsman too!"

"Actually, my love for music conquers my love for the blade," Brook explains, happily allowing himself to be tugged onto the Sunny. "I am a musician, if that should please you?"

Luffy practically _glows_.

"Oh no," says Nami, realising that their fate is sealed.

"Guess I better start planning meals for eight," Sanji sighs.

Usopp almost dies of fright when the towering skeleton of a man ducks into the kitchen, but Brook merely laughs at the sniper's terror and perches himself down carefully at the dining room table. The furniture has not been built with a nine-foot man in mind, but Brook seems only delighted as he tucks his knees up to his chest and squeezes himself into place.

"This is Brook!" Luffy introduces, beaming at the crew as they file into the room, curiosity compelling them to discover what they can about this new addition to the ship. "He's our nakama now!"

To their credit, the remaining four members of the crew take this declaration in stride, although Usopp has to be pushed out from behind Franky's back before he introduces himself in return. Tiny beside Brook, Chopper approaches their newest nakama with a doctor's critical eye, seeming both awed and overwhelmed by the medical phenomenon that has body has to present. Luffy laughs as the doctor begins firing off a series of questions at a hundred words a second, and the other medical marvels on the crew - Zoro, the spirit, and Franky, the half-mechanical man - make sympathetic noises at Brook's flustered replies.

"How long has your body been like this?" Chopper asks, now inspecting his patient's ribcage after having rid the skeleton of his jacket. Truly, it is less of a jacket than most of Nami's wardrobe, so Franky had muttered about _throwing it into the fire_ before clanking off to find their new nakama some clothes.

"Oh, perhaps fifty years or so? The days are so terribly long with only music for company, you see, so you'll have to forgive me as do believe I lost count somewhere along the line - that is, the _Grand Line_! Yohohohoho!"

Brook's laughter rings with an infectious tune. The oven hobs spit and splatter like the cook's cursing tongue, but only the skeleton seems to find hilarity in the crew's dismayed silence.

"_Fifty_? But - but _science_ -" Chopper squawks, almost toppling from the tabletop as he rears back in shock. Brook holds out one hand of bone to catch him immediately, instincts already compelling him to protect the littlest of the crew.

"Science has once again established that it is insufficient at explaining all phenomena in this world, wouldn't you say?" Robin asks, smiling as Brook sets the reindeer back onto his feet and then, quite reluctantly, as though awed to be holding such a small and fluffy creature, folds his skeletal body back into the chair.

Chopper blinks his disbelieving eyes, and some of the crew quibble at Brook's daunting misfortune. At Luffy's side, Zoro makes an unhappy noise that is nothing to do with Chopper and everything to do with Brook's lonely laugh.

"If I may," the archaeologist continues. "How did you come to exist in this state?"

"Why, as most come to experience the peculiarities of the world, I imagine!" Brook sing-songs. "I ate a Devil Fruit many years ago - one that granted me an encore! It was only misfortune that lead my soul to return a little late to my body, that's all. But there are many perks with being a skeleton, I assure you."

"Would you classify not having a shadow as one of them?" Robin asks, and the crew, as one, peer beneath the table to inspect the musician's feet.

"Oh, no," Brook says, quite happily despite the ranging exclamations of flabbergast being directed at his patchy shoes. "A thief once stole my shadow from me, and I have unfortunately very little chance of retrieving it."

Usopp's head _thunks_ as it hits the underside of the table. "Someone _stole_ your shadow?"

"Why can't you get it back?" Chopper squeaks.

"Who was it?" Luffy asks, leaning forward in interest. Elbows on the table, a daredevil grin and bright, starry eyes in hand, the captain's curiosity causes a collective groan from the less adventurous members of the crew. "We'll beat them up for you."

"Oh my, oh thank you," Brook replies, fanning himself as though he has the skin to fluster at the attention. "But I'm afraid I must decline. I would not wish to cause any trouble."

"We'll beat anybody up," Luffy stresses, as though this is even in question.

"Hear! Hear!" Sanji calls from the kitchen, muttering about a cigarette. Cupboards clatter as he works, the sounds punctuating his speech. "Face it, Brook, Luffy gets anything he wants. You want extra parmesan to go with this cold, hard truth?"

The crew make a concurring noise, but there is something in their eyes that suggest it is _they_ who ensure their captain gets whatever he desires. Sanji waves a block of cheese at the table, and Luffy springs up to bellow over the skeleton's tinkering reply.

"Me, me, me! I want extra parmesan!"

The cook glowers over the countertop, swiftly holding the cheese behind his back. "Sit down, idiot; you don't think I know that? Wait for dinner like everyone else," he barks, flicking the captain on the nose. Luffy howls dramatically and clutches his face, and at the table, Nami sighs and wrenches the rubber man into his seat.

"So perhaps not everything?" Brook laughs, accepting the cook's offer with a flourish of gratitude. Franky clanks back in then, a leopard-spotted _something_ tucked in his arms, but if Brook seems horrified by the outlandish pattern, then he says nothing of the sort as he fusses and coos over the new clothes.

"We're not that good," Nami grumbles unashamed, before literally pinning the squirming captain down to the table. It would seem to be an uncomfortable position for her, except she moves with such ease that Luffy may as well be made of clay, his protests soft and mouldable in her hands.

"He'll calm down in a couple of minutes," the navigator says at Brook's look of concern.

"If we're lucky," Usopp adds, and Luffy snorts a burst of laughter into the edge of the table.

Brook continues to insist that he cannot remain with them throughout the duration of the meal, and Luffy continues to ignore him. How delicious the tagliatelle is appears to be the only matter in which they agree, so amidst Brook's soft arguments and Luffy's brazen denials, and the exasperated groans from the rest of the crew, Sanji is the only Straw Hat to enjoy dinner. Yet, Brook's concluding

compliments to the cook decimate Sanji's golden-headed loopy expression (the one that always makes an appearance when a guest enjoys his food), but this is probably due to the skeleton's declaration that it is the best - and only - meal he's had in half a century, and why, Sanji-kun, I would love to eat that again_, rather than any insult the cook may receive.

"Ooh, does that mean you don't have to sleep either?" Luffy asks, grinning so widely that bits of pasta poke out from between his teeth. "Hey, hey, where does all that food go anyway? Do you have a stomach? Does it just drop out? Does that mean I can have it back?"

("What is it with spirits and not eating on this goddamn ship," Sanji grumbles, collecting the dishes with jerky, passive-aggressive motions as he tries to inhale a cigarette).

"Sleep is not something I require, no, but I can induce something like sleep in myself, should I wish it," Brook explains. "And no, I don't believe I do have a stomach! But where the food goes - nobody knows! Yohohohoho!"

Luffy pouts, and Brook looks quite abashed for making the captain frown. He tinkers more nervously, adjusting the too-short sleeves of the spotted jacket, and then seems distracted for a moment with the feel of something so soft beneath his fingertips of bone.

"Does this mean Zoro-san shares my predicament?" he asks, blinking impossible eyes at the crew.

"He doesn't sleep, if that's what you mean," Usopp explains, twirling the remains of the tagliatelle around his fork. Sanji gives him a stern look before gesturing for the plate, and Usopp blushes as he passes it over.

"Or eat," the sniper adds, blinking as the cook continues muttering darkly to himself. "But I guess that'd be difficult?"

He sounds unsure, as if a sword managing to eat is something that ever could be possible. He rubs his chin with a contemplative motion, and Franky's booming laughter rocks the Sunny's dining room.

"Here, you should say 'hi'!" Luffy says, thrusting the WadÅ• Ichimonji at the skeleton. "He can be a bit shy though!"

"Luffy, I don't think that's actually true," Nami sighs.

"Oh my, of course," Brook says, taking the katana in an expert grasp. He handles it carefully, seeming to weigh and inspect the blade with a critical eye, and then bends a hand around the hilt, fingers clacking against the bone-white end. After a soft, "Would you mind terriblyâ€|?" the skeleton slides the katana from its sheath, revealing a blade sharp and magnificent to glint in the kitchen light. He draws it all the way, mindful to keep the katana away from his new nakama, and then emits an awed gasp as the WadÅ• Ichimonji's razor edge crackles a hyacinth blue.

"No, no, that didn't hurt," he says then, speaking solely to the spirit inside. "I must say, that is one of the advantages of having

a body like mine! I imagine that there are advantages, too, of inhabiting a form like this but - yes, I agree - perhaps only few."

He nods along in agreement, and though they can only hear one-half of the conversation, the crew hush to allow Brook and Zoro their introductions.

"This is a marvellous blade," Brook says fondly, examining the curved edge. "I see that your captain has been taking care of it. Oh really? Yes, it is a fine art! An easy mistake to make, I'm sure."

He laughs, glancing over at Luffy with the smile of one privy to a joke at another's expense; the captain grins back, certain that they're discussing his more disastrous attempts at cleaning the WadÅ• Ichimonji, but then he falters, expression lifting in surprise. Impossible eyes blinking back, Brook's turn of the conversation drifts away as his attention shifts from the captain, astonishment morphing onto his skull as he stares at something in the room.

Luffy tilts his head, curious to discover what has captured the musician's attention - only, when he looks, he sees nothing but planks of wood and the far wall of the Sunny, the shelves and trinkets there.

"What is it?" he asks, wondering what strange things they are yet to find upon the Grand Line. He has a moment to wonder if the shadow-stealing fiend has returned - and wouldn't that be awesome? - but then Brook's face lights up in the hue of the katana's glow.

"Why, I do believe it's Zoro-san," Brook exclaims - gleefully, like a child, like he has in response to everything about the Sunny and her boisterous crew. For him, this is a day of new things, a grand day, and one to be felt all the way to his bones, and Luffy shares in the musician's delight as their nakama splutter in stupor.

"You can see him?"

"He's there?"

"Where?"

"Maybe he is shy," Franky comments, and the thuwank in response is Nami face palming at the ludicrousness of these buffoons I call a crew_.

"What does he look like?" Usopp asks, peering at the space behind their captain's head. "Zoro, can you make us see you?"

"Wait, wait, wait!" Luffy cries, throwing himself up with an idea. He fumbles around in his pockets, tongue clamped between his teeth as he pats the waistcoat desperately. "The mirror, the mirror! We could use it!"

"He's probably not going to be able to hold it," Nami says, sighing her perpetual sigh as she encourages the captain back into his seat.

"But we could hold it up for him!" Luffy argues, wiggling in her

grasp. Patting down his pockets is futile, but he goes as far as to tip his hat upside-down, just in case he thought to store it there.

"Zoro-san says 'just describe me'," Brook announces, sweeping his gaze across the crew in question, and at their encouragement to do just that, he sets down the WadÅ• Ichimonji before clearing his throat. "Well, I'm not much of an artist myself, butâ€¦ I see a young man, perhaps the same age as Sanji-san here, perhaps older, who stands with a slight slouch, arms crossed, yes, and broad shoulders, and he has quite a remarkable shade of green hair
_"

"_Green?_"

"What is he - a _plant?_"

"He produces all that light to photosynthesise."

The WadÅ• Ichimonji crackles, spitting lightning and anger, and the crew erupt with laughter.

"There are three gold earrings in his left ear," Brook goes on, giggling along at the first mate's expense. "But his expression is somewhat unclear - fuzzy, perhaps - and I can't quite make out the finer detailsâ€¦"

He shakes his head in response to a question that only he can hear, fingers drumming against the katana's guard. "No, you're not quite corporeal, Zoro-san. You still sound as though you are speaking from the blade, rather than over there. Granted, the distance is not that greatâ€¦"

"Sounds like you need a push, idiot," Sanji says, motioning a dishcloth at the katana.

"So he's still connected to the WadÅ• Ichimonji?" Usopp asks, humming thoughtfully. "Maybe that's why only Brook can see him."

"Him and his _moss-head_," Sanji laughs. Nami snorts into her drink, splattering the table and captain both, but Luffy only laughs.

"And yet, we all are currently incapable of perceiving Zoro-san whenever the katana is in our possession," Robin notes over another bout of giggling. "Brook-san, how exactly did you say you came to exist in this form?"

"Why, I ate the Yomi Yomi no Mi! I am a Reviving Human. My soul found its way back to my body before I reached the other side. Quite marvellous, isn't it?"

"Super~!" Franky agrees, bellowing over Usopp's dark mutter of, "No it's really not."

"Perhaps your time in a spiritual body has given you a greater connection with our sword spirit here?" Robin muses. She sips the cup of coffee that Sanji had miraculously summoned for her, intrigue keeping her expression pensive even as she scalds her tongue.

"We saw him on Skypiea though - or, Luffy and Sanji-san did, anyway,"

Nami argues, mopping up the spillage on the table. "So nobody has to have a near-death experience."

"Zoro-san says 'certainly not if I can help it'," Brook chimes. The WadÅ• Ichimonji flares, sparking an angry white, and the skeleton titters guilty before rubbing the back of his neck, bone-grinding vertebrae. "Oh, I apologise Zoro-san, am I not supposed to repeat everything you say?"

"Zoro's grumpy sometimes," Luffy explains, still staring intently at the place where the first mate is supposed to be. With a determined hand, he reaches out to search the air for the nakama that he cannot see, and beside him, Brook gasps a little breathlessly, "Yes, yes he's right there."

Only - Luffy reaches nothing but air.

Lips dropping, he scowls, motioning for the katana. Dutifully, Brook slides the blade back into its sheath and passes it over, but still cannot surprise a noise of surprise as Zoro no doubt disappears in front of his eyes.

"Where's Zoro?" Luffy asks the blade.

/Here/ the spirit says - a stupid response if Luffy ever heard one, but it puts a lopsided grin on the captain's face. _/Still standing in front of you./_

"Yeah?"

/Yeah, idiot, you're staring at my shoulders. Look up a little./

Luffy tilts his head back, trying to judge the distance between Zoro's invisible collar and his invisible eyes. Zoro doesn't make any further complaint, so Luffy figures he can't be far off the mark as he lifts a sunny smile from beneath his hat.

"Hi!" he says, as though the sword spirit is someone he can perceive. There's a mutter of something from the first mate, inaudible within the bustle of the kitchen. "Has Zoro always been in the room?"

/Nah, don't think so. This is kinda new./

"Yeah?" Luffy repeats, glad he hasn't been oblivious to the spirit all this time.

/Yeah. I've got toes./

Luffy laughs, imagining a young man with bright green hair and a permanent scowl wiggling his toes in wonder, and Zoro laughs too, only to be cut off by a yawn. The swordsman curses to himself, muttering sleepily, and Luffy cocks his head as he listens to the weight of exhaustion weighing his first mate down.

"Are you gonna sleep now?"

Zoro shrugs - or, Luffy imagines he does. _/Dunno. Don't think so. Think I might try?/_ He sounds uncertain, asking the captain's

unseeing eyes and the crew's unhearing ears for answers, and then clicks his tongue as Luffy only blinks. _/Any suggestions on - um - getting back into the WadA• Ichimonji?/_

The captain shakes his head, black hair sweeping over the crow's feet by his eyes. "Nope!"

/Helpful/ Zoro groans, yawning once again. _/Ah, fuck it. I'm gonna nap./_

Despite having no idea how Zoro is going to do that, Luffy inclines his head. "I'll wake Zoro when something cool happens!"

The spirit scoffs, sounding oddly distant. _/And you wonder why I don't get any sleep/_ he says, and as he speaks, his voice begins to soften until it is but a mumble at the brink of consciousness - at the edge of sleep, were it anybody else. Then, there is no reply no matter how much Luffy pokes, prods, and calls his name, and the crew watch on worriedly as the captain slides the katana back into place at his side.

"Is heâ€| sleeping?" Chopper asks, expression pinching with concern.

"Think so," Luffy says, stretching out and ruffling the reindeer's fur. "He'll be alright - he's Zoro! I'll wake him if anything _"

Something rises up through the table like a jack-in-the-box cackling and bouncing and surprising them all, and more than one member of the crew scream. The wispy creature shrieks back, the white, almost translucent blob of its body darting up towards the ceiling, and Brook is not the only pirate to rear back in shock. The ghost - for it could be nothing else - emits a childish laugh and disappears through the decks of the Sunny, and as the Straw Hat pirates wheeze and clutch their chests, the musician crashes over the chairs in his haste to reach the door. Luffy springs out after him, the thrill of adventure tugging him on, and then almost loses sight of the skeleton in the murk and fog that has settled over the ship.

"Whoa!" Luffy exclaims, holding onto his hat as he throws his head upwards, neck stretching high up towards the main sail. A great, obstructing shape can just be seen through the darkness, the shadows of turrets and towers rising up from the horizon all around, and the captain waves his arms and hollers with glee. "Hey, hey, what's that?"

"That is Thriller Bark!" Brook replies, bones clattering as he sprints across the deck. "You must flee here; it's not safe for you!"

Why they would flee something so blatantly awesome is beyond Luffy, and he watches dumbfounded as the musician vaults over the side of the Sunny, still shouting about _danger_ and this strange, new place called _Thriller Bark_. Despite the moment of sheer panic it causes in the captain, Brook lands safely on _top_ of the ocean waves, and then, quite astonishingly, begins to run across the surface of the sea.

Luffy's neck snaps back into place, and a rubbery jaw hits the

floor.

"That is AWESOME!" he bellows, crashing into the ship's banister. Franky scoops him up by his shirt before he can attempt to copy the musician, and Luffy squirms in the shipwright's mechanical grasp. "Brook! HEY BROOK. TEACH ME HOW TO DO THAT."

"Luffy, now is not the time!" Nami yells from the upper deck. "Can't you see we're surrounded? We need to get somewhere safe! No, don't you pout at me, Luffy. Come on - ALL HANDS ON DECK!"

"I thought the captain was supposed to make a call like that?" Franky muses, hauling said captain away from the side of the ship.

Luffy sags in the cyborg's hold, reduced to a whining rag doll as he is carried up to the helm. "Nami's scary enough to get what she wants," he says, and Robin laughs as she slips past, chains of fingers and hands blooming across the main deck.

"Ow, can't argue with that one," Franky says, depositing the captain by the wheel. He guides the ship at Nami's instruction, and above them, the Sunny's sails flap and billow as the lion figurehead swings over the horizon. "Don't think we'll be getting out of this one though."

He's right - to Nami's despair. Thriller Bark has them trapped at all sides, a prison of an island, a tomb of a ship caging them in through the Florian Triangle gloom, and Luffy is overjoyed at the opportunity to explore. Unwilling to share the sentiment, the crew fluster about the ship, fussing and panicking about the need to escape, and Luffy bounces along with them with a supernova smile.

"All in favour of not disembarking?" Usopp asks, shooting his hand up into the air. Nami, Chopper, and Sanji copy him; "I'm impartial," Robin claims, and Franky merely shrugs.

"All in favour of exploring this creepy island that definitely shouldn't be approached and will likely get us all killed?" the sniper adds.

Luffy is the only one to raise his hand. "Captain's decision counts for three!"

"That still puts you at a loss," Nami argues, sounding thankfully for his dim-witted calculation.

"Zoro would say 'yes'," Luffy claims, wobbling his hand about as though trying to create the impression that his is not the only vote.

"No he wouldn't."

Nu-uh says the shake of Luffy's head. "He would if I asked him to."

Pummelling him into the deck underestimates the fury that Nami inflicts upon the captain's innocent smile. "That - is - cheating!"

"I get the impression that this happens a lot," Franky mumbles,

raising an eyebrow at the archaeologist beside him as the captain squawks and squeals.

"Our navigator seems to be under the impression that we are a democracy," Robin replies, tittering a laugh behind her hand. "Democracy is an illusion, of course."

"_Yeouch_, you don't beat around the bush, do ya sis?" Franky asks, scratching his cheek. Across the deck, Chopper frantically tries to rescue their captain before Nami beats him into the ground, and Sanji and Usopp exchange a glance, sighing with equal exasperation.

Robin lifts a smile towards him, her eyes of daggers bright with mirth. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

* * *

><p>End Notes: Please leave a review as you go!
:)

3. Chapter 3

****Notes****: There's also a tiny hint of (pre-)Franky/Robin in this chapter that honestly wrote itself :P

* * *

><p>our shores of starlight (come sailing in)

**** - III - ****

_If I, if I can surround you with beautiful sounds, I will
>If I, if I can repay you for coming to save me, I will
If I, if I
can be who you want me to be, I will
>If I, if I can surround you
I will, I will, I will_
>- Miracle Cure; Sea Wolf<p>

* * *

><p>Luffy gets his way.<p>

No one is surprised. The crew accept their fate with varying degrees of resignation; Usopp's laughter is humourless as he sinks down onto the deck, but his face lights up when Franky presents the Mini Merry. The little boat cheers Usopp, Nami, and Chopper up, and not long they're giving it a whirl over the gloomy sea as though they never had any fears to begin with.

"Cute," Sanji says, clicking his lighter, but he's not talking about Nami's smile as the Mini Merry spins round and round and round.

Franky shrugs, quirking a smile. "What can I say?" He laughs, a little embarrassed. "Come on Straw Hat, aren't we docking the Sunny?"

"Yeah!" Luffy cheers.

Sanji nods along as though he's really agreeing. "Where

exactly?"

"Anywhere!"

"That's not how it works," Franky sighs, but he's already returning to the helm to fulfill his captain's wish.

"Are you going to wake Zoro-san?" Robin asks, as the Sunny bobs towards the island.

Luffy thinks about it for a moment, clamping his tongue between his teeth. "Nah," he decides, patting the katana's hilt. "He should sleep for a while. Do you think we'll find any treasure? I'll wake him when we find something awesome!"

"An island hidden amidst the Florian Triangle has a lot to offer, I'm sure," the archaeologist agrees. "Especially one that our newest nakama begged us to flee from."

"Normal people would listen to advice like that," Sanji adds, speaking around a mouthful of smoke.

Luffy sticks out his tongue at him, and the cook mirrors the action. "Normal's boring," the captain declares.

Sanji's visible eye rolls, and then hides his fond expression behind another puff of his cigarette. "I'll go prepare some lunch then."

"MEAT."

"Hollering at me only makes me wanna serve you vegetables, moron. Lemme go," the cook exclaims, attempting to untangle himself from the rubbery limbs.

Luffy pouts and presses his cheek into the cook's shoulder. "Meat?" he asks softly, and Sanji scoffs.

"Say the magic words."

Wide eyes blink at the cook's darkening scowl. "...Captain's orders?"

Sanji kicks him overboard.

* * *

><p>Thriller Bark is home to some bizarre beings, as they soon discover, the party of four dilly-dallying in the wake of the path left by their missing nakama. Truly, Luffy isn't worried about his lost crew - Nami, Usopp, and Chopper are smart enough to protect themselves - and so he takes the time to appreciate the twilight scenery - the graveyard, the spindly trees and sodden ground, an island abandoned to mud, carcasses, and bone.<p>

"This place is great!" Luffy exclaims, holding the severed head of a walking, talking, quite shamelessly screaming corpse. Unfazed, the captain laughs his signature laugh, flourishing his undead captive for his crew to see. "Look at his teeth! Man, isn't this awesome?"

"He does appear to be showing quite a substantial level of decay," Robin comments, equally unbothered by the bespattering of body parts and gore about them. To the zombies' credit, they're already piecing themselves back together, although there does seem to be some confusion as to which limbs belong to whom, if the occasional grunts and wails are anything to go by.

Luffy is happy to leave them be. They did admit to scaring their missing nakama after all.

"Oi Luffy, if you don't shut that one up, _I'll_ do it," Sanji grumbles, slumping into his battle-ready slouch. He lights a cigarette unconcerned and taps the ashes away, a scornful smile flashing across his expression as the half-zombie beneath him splutters and coughs.

Luffy pouts, chin wobbling as he deliberates the screaming head in his hands. "Hey, tell me where my nakama went," he demands, pressing his face so close to scrutinise the zombie that his nose squishes the rotten nostrils before him.

"W-why would I do that?" the head asks, and Sanji whirls around and _kicks_ it right out of Luffy's grasp. Across the graveyard it bounces, shrieking all the while, and what's left of the other zombies unanimously point in the direction of the far gate, lips and tongues spluttering in terror.

"That way, huh?" Luffy says, bounding off to explore without so much as batting an eyelash at his cook's unforgiving behaviour.

Said cook glowers at the remaining zombies before dutifully following along behind. "See, that wasn't so hard, was it?" he asks; the zombies squeal, and Franky heaves a sigh.

"There's never a moment of peace with you lot, is there?" the shipwright asks.

"Our captain would consider that 'boring'," Robin explains.

Beyond the graveyard, they encounter a corpse of a man carrying only a light, his face ashen, bruised, and grey. He stumbles along without a shadow at his heels, and Luffy _oohs_ and _aahs_ as the stranger proclaims his dilemma, accounting his misfortune to a man named Gekko Moriah. He explains with a trembling tone that Thriller Bark is a ship, the largest that there ever has been, and when Luffy's eyes gleam in the lantern glow, he warns them not to continue, begs them not to go.

"What sort of pirate would I be if I didn't?" Luffy asks, sniggering fearlessly at the mansion hiding within the gloom, its towers and cold, steel gates like giants and monsters waiting patiently to inflict Moriah's doom.

"A smart one?" Sanji asks.

"Definitely not a dead one," Franky adds.

Deciding that his crewmates are simply _wrong_, Luffy adjusts his hat, pats the hilt of Zoro's blade, and marches up the mansion

stairs. The wailing monotones of the shadow-less man ring out behind him, so Luffy offers the man a cheery wave as the great, creaking doors of the house quake and lock behind them.

"That was reassuring," Robin notes, unflappable and sincere.

Luffy laughs, loud and carefree in spite of the sinister shadows of the house, the dark corners, the creeping lights, and the way the walls watch his every move, and he continues to laugh until only he, of his crew, remain unhounded, unchased, and until he stares at the smile of the Shichibukai himself, his razor teeth, horns, and the stitches holding together the ghostly flaps of his skin. Where his crew have been taken he has no idea, the puppets of this macabre mansion having picked them off one by one, but if there is anything that Luffy can be sure of, it is that he will be the Pirate King and nobody, not even Moriah, will stop him.

Granted, clanking around in a golden suit of armour within a tiny, rat-worthy cage seems to put Luffy at the disadvantage here, but it is Moriah who lazes around and orders others to do his dirty-work for him, and it is Moriah who underestimates the will of his opponent.

(The Will of the D).

"I AM GOING TO BE THE PIRATE KING," Luffy bellows at his captors, smushing his helmet up against the cage bars. "Gimme back my nakama!"

Moriah sighs shadowed eyes at him, the taunt, white skin around his mouth tugged into a frown. "I'm not interested in your crew," he claims, too lazy to even wave a dismissive hand. "Let them run around for all I care."

"Three of them are missing, and amongst them is my bride," the lion-muzzled man explains, unable to prevent a growl at this apparent tragedy. Luffy doesn't know which of his nakama the man is talking about, but he can't imagine Robin in a wedding dress or Nami willingly wearing one - but maybe the lion-man directs his preferences elsewhere?

"Got away from you, did she?" chimes the girl with bubblegum-pink hair, twirling her umbrella around as though spinning away the rain. She laughs gleefully, batting thick eyelashes at the enraged snarl from the "groom".

"She's my bride!"

"She won't do as you ask," the blonde woman says, face an apathetic mask even as the man continues to splutter and growl:

"Who said anything about asking?"

A peculiarly Nami-like squawk of outrage peeps up from the otherwise silent bear in the room, and Luffy blinks from behind the cumbersome helmet visor as the enlarged soft-toy stuffs a paw into its mouth. Moriah's weird lackeys continue to bicker, much to the Shichibukai's exasperation, so Luffy turns his eyes to the cage, pondering how best to escape his confinement.

"Hey, Zoro. Zoro, wake up," he whispers, wiggling so that the sword stuck to his side knocks against the cage. Only the squishy bear looks his way, eyes wide and frantic, the other occupants preoccupied with throwing accusations at one another to notice the sound. Luffy ignores it, rolling about some more, and then huffs out a breath of frustration as the suit of armour clangs about him, digging into all his uncomfortable places.

(Maybe putting it on simply because it looks cool had been a bad idea).

"Zoro," the captain says more firmly, risking a glance at Moriah as the colossal man heaves a sigh, growing bored with his subordinates. "I need you to wake up now."

A yawn rings out from the WadÅ• Ichimonji, sleepy mumbling soon following: /I'm up, I'm up, sheesh. What're you - what's with the shiny get-up? Why are we in a cage?/_

Despite himself, Luffy grins into the golden helmet. "I got caught."

/Got - what/_ the spirit replies, alarm increasing as consciousness returns. /Is this Thriller Bark?/_

"Zoro really was sleeping then?"

/Guess so. What the hell's going on? Where's everyone else?/_

"We need to go find them," Luffy says, urgency encouraging him not to waste time explaining everything for now. Although he is sure that Thriller Bark's eccentricity will amuse the first mate, Luffy can fill Zoro in with the details later - when they're searching for the crew once again. "D'you think you could get us out of here? This gloopy stuff's really sticky."

/Eh? Ah - well. The lightning'll draw a lot of attention, but... Guess you can't draw WadÅ• Ichimonji huh?/_

Zoro is correct on both accounts, but that hadn't been what Luffy was implying. "But what about you?" he presses, glancing back through the cage to where the argument is beginning to die away. Moriah appears to have found a distraction with a pick between his teeth, but it won't be long before he tires of listening to his underlings squabble.

"Zoro could materialise himself," Luffy clarifies, thinking back to Brook, the Sunny, and the progress that Zoro had made. "And he could cut through these bars real easy 'cause he said he's a swordsman, right? And the WadÅ• Ichimonji is his sword soâ€|"

He knows it's a little unfair to dump so much pressure on the spirit, but apart from chewing his way out of the cell, Luffy doesn't know how else to escape this predicament. Usually, he wouldn't worry, assured both in his nakamas' strength and that they'll come and break him out, but Thriller Bark is Moriah's domain, and Moriah is not a man that Luffy wants his nakama to cross - more than they already have. Finding his nakama safe and sound is his topmost priority - Brook included, bone and shadow both - and Zoro will understand that.

Zoro's resolve will resonate with that.

/...Aye, captain/ the first mate says, conceding to the request after a moment's deliberation._ /I'll try./_

Luffy snickers into the plates of gold, _sensing_ rather than perceiving the sword spirit considering his next action. "You called me 'captain'!" he says, wonderstruck by way the title rolled from Zoro's tongue.

/I'll call you 'thick-headed' in a minute if you don't pipe down./

"Zoro's embarrassed!"

/Shut up you idiot, do you want them to hear you?/

"Zoro's embarrassed," Luffy repeats, this time barely whispering the words. He has to clack his jaw together to prevent a snigger at the spirit's maddened sigh; not fast enough, it seems, as Moriah rolls his bulbous body over and narrows his beady eyes at Luffy's crimson face.

"Is this guy _really_ worth 300 million beli?" the umbrella-wielding girl cries, following the Shichibukai's gaze. "I'm sure a negative hollow or two will wipe that smile from his face."

"Full of yourself, aren't you?" lion-man snaps, ducking away when the girl jabs her umbrella at him.

"At least I know how to get what I want and _keep it_, moron."

"Oh dear," the last occupant of the room mutters, a squat man with tiny, black spectacles and a cascading mane of plum hair. He slaps a hand over his face, as equally displeased with the bickering as their master, it seems, and Luffy nudges WadÅ• Ichimonji as Moriah finally rises from his chair.

The blade glows within its sheath, opal light pouring into the cage. Luffy winces, unable to stare at the moonlight flare, and glances away just as the katana crackles, spits, and _burns_, the gloopy substance binding the captain's arms sizzling in the heat.

/Fuck!/ Zoro curses, his voice resounding out loud and distant._ /Why is this so goddamn difficult - ?/_

Luffy wiggles, realising that the bindings are beginning to melt and slip away. "Keep going!" he urges, tugging an elbow free as the commotion prompts squawks and swearing from the captors. "It's working!"

/No it's fucking not - !/

"No, no, no, it's _hot_ - it's burning away the -"

WadÅ• Ichimonji ceases emitting light instantly, leaving the captain to blink dazed spots of afterimages from his eyes.

_/You're wearing a _metal _suit of armour!/_ _Zoro hisses, his concern

providing an ample explanation as to why Luffy's skin is blistering, scorching, and raw.

"Ah, don't worry about it, just -"

Moriah reaches into the cage and the WadÅ• Ichimonji _flares _out, swallowing the cell in an inferno of light. The Shichibukai retreats, astonishment morphing his lax expression into a pale-faced surprise, and Luffy hurls himself out of the cage, rubber body clumsy within the sweltering suit.

"Catch him!"

Luffy yelps, tumbling past the enraged Shichibukai. The underlings snap to attention immediately, their argument postponed as they scramble to complete the order; the lion-man lunges, claws and fangs nicking Luffy's vambrace as the captain dives out of the way, and the pink-haired girl shrieks a laugh as the growling groom catapults away.

"Do I have to do _everything_ around here?" the bespectacled man bemoans, but even so, he doesn't so much as lift a finger as his comrades rush to catch the captain, the pink-haired girl summoning ghosts that cackle with childish glee.

/The hell is this place. Why's everyone stitched together?/

"They're making an army of shadow-zombies!" Luffy pants, desperately trying to outrun the gaggle of ghouls. "Cool, right?"

/_You couldn't've woken me earlier?/_

Luffy laughs, helmet clanging free as he dive-bombs out of lion-man's second attempt at subduing him, and then quite promptly trips over said helmet and crashes to the ground, one of the ghosts zooming over his head.

This time, the overgrown stuffed teddy bear makes a sound suspiciously like Usopp's squawk of terror. Yet the warning comes too late, despair decimating Luffy's self-esteem as another ghost passes through him, its wispy body leaving a trail of self-hatred and agony behind.

/Oi, Luffy!?!/

"Leave me," the captain moans, curling up into a ball on the floor. Despite Zoro's bellowing bemusement, he cannot bring himself to flee his fate, assured that accepting his demise at Moriah's hand is the only way he'll ever escape this worthless life he has built.

"When I'm reborn," Luffy cries, feeling Death's cold hands looming over him, his shadow like Moriah's, his laughter as cruel as Enel's, and Wapol and Crocodile's before. "I should be an anemone."

Moriah snatches him up in his gigantic grasp, and Luffy cannot bring himself to struggle. Laughing a wailing laugh, the Shichibukai flourishes his despondent prize and orders more rope to be brought, and distantly, as though Luffy's will is screaming from far away, there is a ringing in the captain's ears, thunder and fury.

/Back off!/

The WadÅ• Ichimonji burns again - only, this time the light sets the world aflame, white-hot fire so bright that it searing reality, shape, and shadow away, an incandescent shield against Moriah's devilish desires.

(What is a blade if not a very sharp shield?)

Moriah seems interested now. Luffy squawks as he's dropped, red-hot rubber skin flaring as the golden armour clatters about him (he really shouldn't have put it on). For a moment, he is blind in the wake of WadÅ• Ichimonji's light, aware of nothing but the scalding of the armour, his body on fire, but then Moriah lunges and Luffy snaps up, peeling pieces of the suit away as he flees.

A plate smashes into his face - from where, he can't tell, but the throw aims true - but the absurdity of the weapon distracts him for long enough so that the lion-man's final strike hits home, flattening the captain to the ground. At Moriah's request, he wrenches WadÅ• Ichimonji from Luffy's side, and Luffy growls, scrabbling for possession over the katana.

"Hey! HEY. Let him go! Give him back!"

"Him?" Moriah asks, snatching the blade from the squabbling pair. The break in connection cuts off Zoro's yell for Luffy, but the Shichibukai gives no indication that he can hear the spirit as he waddles back to his chair.

"So there is something in here," Moriah muses, watching the katana spit lightning white and blue. He seems unfazed by the pain if he feels any, laughing at Zoro's attempts to break free.

"String up the captain," he orders, slouching back into his seat. WadÅ• Ichimonji appears bizarrely small in his grasp, but there is nothing Luffy can do as Moriah's lackeys rebind him in rope. "Let's see how you fair without your sword at your side. Turn on the light. I want to see the shadow this blade is hiding."

A switch clangs, lightbulbs sizzle, and Moriah gives a rumbling, belly-drum laugh as light floods the room, stretching shadows out across the floor. Luffy roars, outraged, and a great pair of scissors swing down to cut -

* * *

><p>He lurches into awakening, rubber limbs flying wild as he flails upright, cracks his head against the ceiling, and then tumbles from the hammock and onto the Sunny's wooden floor. This violent awakening scares the reindeer dozing on the sofa into leaping a foot into the air, which results in both Devil Fruit users screaming at each other until they realise where they are.<p>

"Eh? Chopper? How did I get here? Where's my hat? Where's Zoro?"

"There were pegs involved," Usopp says from the doorway, arms crossed and a worried expression frowning darkly from beneath his feathered

hat. Behind him, Franky, Robin, and Sanji are crowded out on the deck, their heads just visible as a mass of colour and shape behind the sniper's rather dashing attire.

"Pegs?" Luffy echoes, spying both his beloved hat and Wad's Ichimonji settled safely on the sofa beside Chopper. In one gallant leap, he springs across the quarters and flops down by the doctor, grinning when the little reindeer squeals.

"Zoro's not responding to anything," Chopper worries, eyes big and concerned as Luffy scoops up the scabbard. "I think he might still be asleep. You and Sanji have had your shadows taken, too."

Luffy blinks and spots that, yes, he does appear not to cast a shadow in the low light of the room. Sanji squeezing past Usopp and striding into the quarters reveals that, he too, has lost the darkness at his feet. Although the concept is not a new one - Brook's shadow, after all, had been stolen long ago - Luffy finds it strange not to see something as ordinary and unnoticeable as his own shadow.

"I can't do anything," Chopper whimpers, ears drooping as the captain explores his now shadow-less motions, swinging his legs from the sofa. "I'm sorry."

"It's not Chopper's fault," Luffy says, scrubbing a gentle hand through the doctor's fur. "Is everyone else okay?"

There is a round of confirmations from the crew, which Usopp's quickly follows with, but Nami's been kidnapped, and then scratches his Pinocchio nose.

Sanji almost hits the roof. "KIDNAPPED?"

The sniper squeaks, making a pacifying motion with his hands as though that could ever be enough to quell Sanji's fire. It's a valiant attempt, and one that only Usopp ever seems brave enough to make, and Luffy can't help but laugh at the misfortune of whoever has kidnapped his navigator. Nami's probably bludgeoning them by now.

"Oh," Usopp adds weakly, watching the flames of Sanji's fury flicker around him. "And, err, most of our food is gone -"

"What," says Sanji.

"- but I'm sure we can restock soon?"

Despair douses the cook's inferno. "Please tell me that's not a question," he says, already halfway out of the door.

"Err," Usopp says, and though he says nothing else, Sanji wouldn't hear him anyway, marching off across the deck to inspect the damage to their supplies.

"Food is probably the least of our concerns now," Franky says, notably once Sanji has moved beyond hearing range. "Usopp-bro's right, we can always restock later, once everyone's back together and you've got your shadows back - ow!"

"Perhaps a plan of action should be discussed?" Robin suggests,

conceding to the cyborg's point. "Our priorities lie with -"

"NAMI," Luffy bellows, throwing his arms up in the air. "MEAT."

"We need to find your shadows too," Usopp adds, gaze shifting uneasily to Luffy's shadow-less feet.

"And the skeleton's," says Franky.

"And Zoro's!" Luffy announces, recalling the simple snip of Moriah's oversized scissors, blade snapping relentless against blade. He doesn't know how to reunite body and shadow - would glue be enough, he wonders - but they can worry about that once they find the corpses that Moriah has stuffed with the darkest reflection of their personalities.

"Eiii, Zoro had his shadow taken?" Chopper squeals, climbing over Luffy's lap to re-inspect the blade with his newly acquired knowledge. "That must be why he's so quiet! He is still asleep!"

"He woke up for a bit," the captain says, compelled to defend Zoro's behaviour as the doctor attempts to rouse the spirit. "Hey, Zoro," he adds then, louder than the uncertain whisperings of the Zoan. "Chopper wants to give you a check-up."

/Don't wake me for that/ the first mate groans, and Chopper squawks, overhearing the exchange with a hoof against the blade.

"I heard that!"

/Whoops. Sorry Chopper, you're the best doctor, really. I like spending time with you./

"Even check-ups, huh?" Luffy says, laughing as Chopper gushes over the katana, muttering profanities at them both.

Zoro makes an indistinguishable sound, deciding not to grace that with an answer.

Once the doctor is temporarily satisfied with his nakama's health and Robin has coerced Sanji from his furious brooding in the pantry, the crew disembark to tackle Thriller Bark once again. With orders to keep their eyes peeled to chase and snag any of the four missing shadows ("I believe the shadow of our musician inhabits the body of a swordsman," Robin explains, and Usopp snorts, adding with a grin, "Yeah, and Sanji's is in a penguin.") the Straw Hat pirates diverge, their goals as one but their paths leading them apart.

Luffy charges to Moriah, eyes ablaze as though the WadÅ• Ichimonji, at his side, has alighted his soul in flame. Finding his and Zoro's wayward shadows would be cool - fun, even, a wild goose chase to never forget - but the dawn is against them, death approaching with a scythe of golden hues, his cloak the lingering chill of night warming peach-pink and plum in the morn. Moriah's demise has a time limit, and Luffy can hear the hourglass trickle as he ascends to the castle, flip-flops flapping up the stairs.

"HEEEY. MORIAH," Luffy hollers, slamming open doors and blazing

through passageways as he storms the mansion. WadÅ• Ichimonji bounces against his legs, sparking with the same need to avenge what they have lost.

"MORIAH," the captain continues, blitzing through the east wing. Mosaic windows reveal the gluttonous grey of the sky outside, the towers of the west wing, and the courtyard and rubble below, but Luffy pays no mind to the gigantic figure in the distance, aware only that it is not Moriah and thus not important. "WHERE ARE YOU? OI, MORIAH! I'M GONNA BE THE PIRATE KING AND I'M GONNA KICK - !"

/Get down!/

Brick and mortar implode into the hallway. Windows shatter, screaming a hail of glass and knives over the captain; he yelps, flattening himself to the carpet as a monstrous arm crashes through the wall, hand, elbow, and thick, stitched-up skin and all. Humongous fingernails scrabble against the floor, tearing up concrete and carpet as the body catches itself; Luffy rolls over, clinging onto his hat, and spies a huge, bulbous eye and a grizzly set of teeth through the ruins of the wall before the giant retreats, dragging its colossal body back through the infrastructure with a deafening howl:

"MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAT."

/You've got to be joking/ Zoro says, exclamation muffled by the sound of Luffy's shrieking laughter.

"Did you hear that? DID YOU HEAR THAT? That's my shadow! He's got my shadow!"

Brushing brick and blood from his jacket, the captain scrambles over to what's left of the wall. The courtyard below is fully visible now, one of the bridges and towers utterly destroyed, and standing in the middle of all the destruction is a beast of a man, horned and snarling and personified, there is no doubt, by Luffy's joyous shadow.

"Hey look!" the rubber man cries, pointing to a black and blonde blur in the rubble. "You can see Sanji from here! OI SANJI!"

/He's not gonna hear you, idiot/ the spirit sighs, WadÅ• Ichimonji clattering against Luffy's thigh as the captain bounces up and down, arms flailing. Another explosion rocks the mansion as the giant swings for the light-footed cook, and screaming rises up from the courtyard in Usopp and Chopper's wailing tones. /Looks like the smarmy, curly-browed bastard's taking a beating. You think - ?/_

"They'll be fine!" Luffy assures, grinning despite the struggle that the crew below are going through, picking themselves up from the wreckage with curses and shouts of anger. "Robin and Franky are down there too, and I trust my nakama!"

/All right/ Zoro says, an easy agreement, trusting in his captain, trusting in his crew. /We better find Moriah before this all goes to shit though. That guy's - /_

A figure moves in the corner of Luffy's eye, scurrying past with a

wobbling pace, cloaked in darkness and smiling with a familiar, sinister grin, and Luffy bolts after him, yelling Moriah's name as he goes.

It's not Moriah, as it turns out - but he only discovers this deep in the forest behind the mansion, when he finally succeeds in capturing the wiggling Moriah-shaped shadow and pinning it to the ground. Rather, it is in fact a decoy, and Luffy roars outraged and humiliated as the shadow quirks its razor mouth and scampers away, leaving the captain heaving in the dirt.

He vows to clobber the Shichibukai at the first possible opportunity; then he picks himself up, dusts himself down, and blinks disorientated through the looming gloom of the trees.

"Eh? Where are we?" he asks aloud, whirling around within the wooded labyrinth for any sight of the castle. The shadow must have led him further than he thought, and Luffy scowls as he plonks his hat onto his hair, realising that he's been played.

"You're at the top end of the ship," a voice drifting through the fog informs him, and Luffy startles as a broad-shouldered, hulking zombie of a man approaches from the trees. His decay is substantial, Hogback's handy-work stitching up almost every inch of his torso and arms, and one single eye rolls loosely towards the captain as Luffy slips into a defensive stance.

"Ships don't have a 'top end', mister," Luffy counters, brows furrowing as the zombie lingers in the tree-line, scarred hands picking at the stitches on his arm. Judging the zombie to be less of a threat and more of an _entirely harmless_ Samaritan, Luffy relaxes a little. The WadÅ• Ichimonji flickers uneasily, so Luffy pats it, sure that this zombie won't cause them any trouble.

"D'you know how to get back to the mansion? I need to beat Moriah up."

"You'll have to go back down," the zombie replies, pointing behind the captain. "Shouldn't take you long if you keep to the path."

Luffy doesn't recall seeing a path anywhere in the forest, and he goes to query the reliability of the stranger's directions, only in the next moment, half a dozen men burst out of the trees and _dog-pile_ onto the wandering zombie.

"Hey, hey, grab him quick - !"

"I've got him! I've got him!"

"Oi, _finally_!"

"Who'd have thought one goddamn shadow could cause so much trouble, eh?"

Luffy blinks and cocks his head as the men - the very much alive and boisterous men - clamber over the flattened zombie and cheer at their success, unaware of the captain's presence. Stunned by this turn of events, he stands there watching them until their squabbling dies away, six heads lifting to stare gobsmacked at the straw-hatted

pirate.

"Who're you?" Luffy asks, and the men _scream_.

"Another one!"

"Where'd he come from?"

"What should we do?"

"Wait - is he wearing a _straw hat_?"

Beneath them, the zombie grumbles a protest into the dirt, but one of the men brandishes a bag marked 'SALT' and bonks the zombie with it.

"Ah, shoosh, we _will_ use this you know," he threatens. Interestingly, he doesn't immediately empty the bag onto the zombie's head, and Luffy can only wonder what has induced this strange behaviour.

"I'm Luffy! D'you guys know how to get back to the mansion? I'm gonna kick Moriah's butt for stealing my crew's shadows."

"The mansion? Yeah it's that way," one of the men pipes up, pointing in the direction opposite to the zombie's instructions. The strange group of people seem to relax at the question, deciding something between them as their captive struggles underneath them.

"You're not a zombie?"

Luffy shakes his head, wondering which direction he should believe. "Nu-uh, I'm a pirate! You _are_ sitting on a zombie though. Why're you sitting on him? Has he got your shadow?"

That would be the logical assumption, except the men shake their heads. "Don't think so," one of them says. "This one's kinda weird. He was wandering around earlier with no clue as to where he was."

"Directionally hopeless," another supplies, and the zombie protests again.

"And he kept asking all these questions about where he was and what was going on and looking all confused - you'd think he'd never seen a forest before, or something," the first man continues, shrugging helplessly. "Total weirdo."

"We ran out of salt earlier so we couldn't purify him, so we were gonna, like, tie him up and stuff, but the captain said we shouldn't 'cause it's not fair," says a third man. "She said it's a bit cruel, innit, to kick a man while he's down."

"You're sitting on him," Luffy reminds them, but he concedes to the point, deciding that he likes this captain, whoever she is.

"Yeah, well, he keeps getting _lost_."

"It's like having a six foot _puppy_," says another, and the men laugh together as they finally clamber off the zombie.

Zoro, for some unfathomable reason, groans, and the zombie echoes him in almost perfect synchrony, grumbling and cursing as he climbs to his feet.

Luffy's grin is unbidden, but wicked all the same.

/Don't say anything/ Zoro warns, voice low with threat and undeniable embarrassment. _/And don't laugh for god's sake./_

Feeling generous as he watches the zombie with Zoro's shadow blink with a bewildered gaze, Luffy smacks a hand over his mouth to muffle a snicker. The group of men continue to chatter between themselves, one of them latched onto the zombie's shirt as though worried he will lose his way while stationary, and Luffy has to tear his eyes away from the _absurdity_ of the scene before amusement overtakes him once again.

The aforementioned captain turns out to be a rather bruised and battered woman called 'Lola', whose hair nearly matches the bubblegum-pink shade of the girl from the mansion. A disproportionately large mouth quirks as she smiles, dark red lipstick stretching across her face, and she introduces herself and her crew - the Rolling Pirates, further victims to Moriah's plot - before enquiring after Luffy with open curiosity.

(After asking him to marry her, which, according to the crew, seems to be the norm).

"I'm gonna be the Pirate King," is his automatic reply. "And I'm gonna beat Moriah's arse."

Lola's face _lights up_ - extraordinarily so for someone whose marriage proposal was just brutally rejected. "Well then, I might just be able to help you there!" she says, winking one of her tiny eyes at him. "We know _all_ of the secrets to Moriah's power."

"Eh?" Luffy squawks. "You _do_?"

/They do?/ Zoro echoes sceptically.

They do, as a matter of fact, and though their explanation seems far-fetched, Luffy still plays along as they bicker over which shadow they should shove into him first. The Rolling Pirates have become apt shadow hunters it seems, although Luffy is sure there is at least _one_ shadow that hadn't required much skill in capturing.

"Can you purify that one?" he asks, interrupting the argument with a determined gesture, pointing towards Zoro's dozy zombie. "It belongs to my swordsman."

"A swordsman?" the Rolling Pirates exclaim, squinting at the zombie dubiously. "Are you sure?"

/Fuckers./

Luffy laughs and nods, his enthusiasm swaying the sceptical pirates. They shrug, saying, _if you're sure_, and then dump a bag of salt over the zombie's head in the easiest purification they have probably

ever seen. Body and shadow separating immediately, the corpse collapses into the earth, and the Rolling Pirates jump up and snatch the shadow as it flails around in shock. Consistent with Brook's vague description, the inky form assumes the shape of a young man with a well-defined physique, broad-shouldered and taller than Luffy with what appears to be a short mop of scruffy hair, and the captain beams as he tugs WadÅ• Ichimonji from his belt, holding it out to reunite -

The pirates hurl Zoro's shadow into Luffy instead, and both captain and first mate yelp.

"Why'd you do _that_?" Luffy bellows, _cracking_ WadÅ• Ichimonji's scabbard against the head of the nearest man. "It belongs to Zoro!"

The other crew blink at him, the injured man with tears in his eyes. "Well your swordsman ain't here right now, is he?" one of them argues, eyeing the white katana nervously. "He won't mind you using his shadow for a bit, right?"

_/_Go ahead./_

"Well I don't have a choice now!" Luffy whines, hating the spirit's acquiescence has come _after_ the choice has been taken from them. Zoro's reluctance to argue in fear of - well, _what_ Luffy isn't sure yet (silence? Disregard? Abandonment?) is an issue; it is something the captain has noticed recently, something he is desperate to change. "But I guess if Zoro says it's okayâ€|?"

_/_Stop whining and start kicking Moriah's arse./_

Luffy nods, fist bumping the sky. "All right!" he cheers, much to the Rolling Pirates' relief. "Hey, hey, how's this work anyway? What should I do?"

"How about you use that sword of yours?"

"Eh?" Rubber hands descend slowly, the captain almost frozen in his stupor. Luffy blinks at the suggestion and then blinks at the katana; running elasticated fingers along the sheath, he grips the end in preparation to draw, but hesitates as he recalls his lack of training. He doesn't draw WadÅ• Ichimonji often, but when he does, he definitely wields it like a stick rather than the weapon it deserves to be. "I've never -"

He unsheathes it. The WadÅ• Ichimonji _clinks_ from its scabbard with a confident grasp, the blade slicing an elegant swoop through the air. Luffy's body _moves_ with the motion, executing a sequence of actions so well loved and rehearsed that he doesn't even _think_ about it, the katana striking again and again, steel a silvery blur. The Rolling Pirates _oooh_ on cue, eyes goggling at the display of skill, and Luffy feels a surge of pride as he slides the katana into its sheath, hand lingering on the hilt.

_/_Well that was weird./_

Luffy has to agree - his actions had not been his own, his will controlled by an instinct that he's never had. It feels wrong to take advantage of Zoro's experience, the years of training, blood,

bruises, and sweat, but at the same time, he cannot help himself, Zoro's shadow like a soul burning so fiercely within him that to ignore is impossible. His hand remains on WadÅ• Ichimonji, clutching the blade as though his skin has never felt the grooves in the hilt, the polished guard, or the sleek sheath before - never held it before, wielded it before. Luffy has, of course he has, but it is sorrow that he feels as he stares at the blade, and he realises that it can't be his own as the grief consumes him - the loneliness, the regret, and the sickening, roiling guilt.

"Gimme some more shadows," Luffy demands: I shouldn't be privy to this, he thinks, wrenching his hand away. He clenches his fist, dissuading himself from reaching for the katana again, and tries to will the emotions - his first mate's emotions - away.

/...Luffy?/_

"Hey, you heard the man!" Lola calls, crew snapping to attention around her. "Let's put those shadows to use! How many do you think you can handle?"

Luffy thinks of Moriah, of the warning from the graveyard-man, his nakama, Brook, and Zoro's mournful shadow, and lifts his eyes to meet the other captain's, gaze dark and determined from beneath his hat.

"Give me all of them."

* * *

><p>Luffy fights with a ferocity worthy of the hundred nightmares he contains.<p>

Moriah plummets down into defeat, and when the sun comes up, it rises with joyous calls and cheer. Thriller Bark is a prison no more, a ship sailing on the despairing Florian seas no longer, and as their captain slips away to slumber, the Straw Hat crew celebrate the return of their shadows, laughing and triumphant and -

Luffy has the strangest dream. A bear plods through the ruins of Thriller Bark, body a hulking, thick-skinned contraption of cogs, screws, and steel. Claw-less though they are, his paws can move mountains, scattering the brick, rubble, and even the air about him - about Luffy, lying there, and about the screaming Straw Hat crew. Defeat comes swift to the pirate crew, Thriller Bark and all their triumphs blasting away, but the bear has eyes only for Luffy - the dreamer, of course, the dreamer of a dream that Kuma turns into a nightmare.

"Monkey D. Luffy," the bear says in an oddly human tone, for a bear, peering down at the captain with small eyes of shadows. He stalks closer, clutching a gold-lined book to his chest, and hauls Luffy up hat, katana, and all, and Luffy groans, struggling to discern whatever else the bear has to say.

Lightning shrieks just a hair's breadth away. Hope rises up within the captain: his skin warms within the light, protected by the blazing ethereal glow, and he is safe here (they all are), safe and sore and tired.

Kuma raises a paw.

And then -

- a _push_.

* * *

><p>(A shout. A promise ringing out, the call of starlight from so very far away.<p>

"_Luffy is the man who will become the Pirate King!_"

A dream unbroken; a dream begun.

And then -)

* * *

><p>Luffy wakes to devastation; Thriller Bark is ruination, less than rubble, decimated, wrecked. Peeling a bloodied skull and sweaty, battle-torn clothes from the rock, the captain hoists himself up with a surprising ease, rubber limbs springing bruised and battered but painless as he moves. Even nausea staves away despite the gloopy spray of blood clotting in his hair; he must have hit his head once or twice - or three times, perhaps, given his peculiarly good health. Regardless, Luffy isn't one to question a stroke of luck, so he sets his sights to his nakama instead, spying the crew heaving themselves into awakening around him. Why they were all unconscious is beyond him - a unanimous need for a nap maybe? - but they're all here and complaining about it, groggy and disorientated, and Luffy beams.<p>

He reaches for his hat; reaches for WadÅ• Ichimonji. Hair reunites with straw, and the blade is still at his side, exactly where he left it. Calling for Zoro is automatic, waiting for a reply is no surprise, but when the spirit's silence lingers on for a moment too long, seconds now, a minute it may be, Luffy calls again and gives the grime-covered scabbard a shake.

"_LUFFY!_"

Sanji. The captain has vaulted to his feet before conscious thought can compel him, the sheer _terror_ in the cook's voice a sound like nothing he's ever heard. Luffy's heart hammers, pounding with the same fear that reverberates in his nakama's tone: "LUFFY!" comes the bellow - agonising, raw, and Luffy vows that whatever it is that has induced such _fear_ in his gentle-hearted cook is going to be _ended_. "_CHOPPER! GET OVER HERE!"

Luffy flies over the rubble, retracing the cook's hasty footsteps out of sight. Movement stumbles in his periphery, a flash of gold bobbing in a haphazard approach. Luffy whirls, skids, and crashes over a boulder in his haste to reach the cook; his elasticated body bounces unharmed against the ruin, hurling him upwards and onwards towards -

"_Luffy_," Sanji wheezes, struggling beneath the dead weight of the man he's half-carrying over the rubble. A head of meadow-green hair

is lulled against his shoulder; his own hair, daffodil blonde over a haunted expression, is dip-dyed crimson, and his face, neck, and chest are splattered in blood, drenched with it. The man at his side seems little more than a gory bespattering of horror and agony, but the noise Luffy makes when he identifies the figure as his first mate echoes Sanji's terrible call.

"Luffy, help me," Sanji pants, the lifeless man falling - crumpling - from the cook's grasp.

Kneecaps shredding as he swoops down, Luffy flings himself beneath Zoro's corporeal form, desperately cradling the unconscious swordsman as they topple to the ground. Above him, Sanji roars for Chopper once again, the sound of footsteps thundering closer, but Luffy only has eyes for his first nakama's shuddering breaths - his face, blanched and sickly, the blood darkening his skin, his ridiculous green hair, sticky with sweat. He has wanted to see his first mate for so long - to see how big he smiles, how he laughs and grumbles and if his mouth twists when he scowls, but not like this.

Not like this could be the only time.

When the others scramble over, Franky tries to pull him away. Chopper and Sanji fire information back at each other, their words escalating in gravity with every passing second. Gathered around them, the crew mutter and gasp in horror at the bloody scene, but Luffy thinks not of the gore as he clings to Zoro's shoulders and rubs a thumb into the swordsman's jaw.

(He'd rub the Wadā• Ichimonji for reassurance, but what good would it do now?)

It's Nami who eventually pulls Luffy away, her touch gentle on his shoulder as she coaxes him up. Chopper replaces him immediately, experienced gaze frantic as he catalogues Zoro's injuries, and Nami has hardly led the captain a few paces before the doctor has whisked the swordsman away.

"He'll be all right," she says, whispering into Luffy's ear as she holds him close, hugging him tight. Franky and Robin disappear with Chopper, but everyone else remains in the grisly aftermath; Brook stands shell-shocked, and Usopp offers Sanji an arm for support, which the cook curses at before resigning himself to the care.

Luffy grips his navigator tight, smearing Zoro's blood across her shirt.

She doesn't complain.

The mansion ruins provide a temporary refuge; exhausted though they are, the crew oblige the doctor's every request by gathering supplies and equipment, running back and forth from the Sunny with bandages, painkillers, and more. Chopper, eerily calm for one who frets and fusses through life, works restlessly to save the life of their nakama, and sitting useless in the corner of their makeshift infirmary is all Luffy can do. Only those with strict permission are allowed into the 'room' (an area cleared of rubble, slightly flatter than what remains of the entrance hall), and Luffy is deemed necessary only because he refuses to budge. Sanji, conversely, is thrown a cloth and told to clean himself up for a blood transfusion,

but slumps as wearily as Luffy once the tube is slipped into his arm.

"A sword spirit with blood loss is not something I imagined worrying about," Chopper despairs, slicing away the tatters of Zoro's clothing. The swordsman is donned in a kimono - or what's left of one, anyway - and Luffy would laugh at the spirit's traditional attire if Chopper were not cutting it to pieces. Imagining gruff, grumbling, I dare you to fit another steak in your mouth Zoro wearing something so elegant is laughable, but there's nothing amusing about the scene before him.

"I wish I knew what blood type he was," Chopper continues, muttering more to himself than the crew around him. His concentration never wavers; perhaps speaking helps him think, or maybe he hopes Zoro will answer. "I'll have to run some tests. Thank god for universal donors. Sanji, if you start feeling sick, please let me know."

Sanji already looks sick, but he nods at the doctor's order, careful not to jog the tube. "I'll be fine. Take as much as he needs."

Chopper's button-blue nose wiggles as his face twists sceptically, but he says nothing more on the matter as he rummages through his kit in search of some miracle cure.

He slaves for hours, stitching up almost every inch of Zoro's chest, dabbing up blood where he can, applying pressure where it hurts the least. Sanji is freed from the transfusion after a brief period, wobbles two feet and promptly passes out, but Robin slips in to relieve Chopper of the pale-faced cook before the little doctor can work himself into a tizzy.

Eventually Chopper snaps off his gloves and lays down his equipment, cautiously checking his patient's heart rate and blood pressure once again. Satisfied, he slouches backwards with a heavy sigh - it's only an inch of movement, if even that, but his whole body seems to sag with the effort, fur drooping, ears twitching down. Luffy's heart leaps to his throat as he edges closer, desperate to reassure himself of Zoro's condition, but Chopper manages a smile despite his crash from the adrenaline-high.

"He's not in immediate danger anymore," the doctor informs him, allowing Luffy's nervous approach. "I want to move him to the Sunny as soon as possible; I'll be able to monitor him better there."

Luffy seats himself beside the reindeer, taking in the grim sight of Zoro's motionless, tangible body. Bandages enwrap his torso, arms, stomach, and head, swathes of cloth as white as the WadÅ• Ichimonji holding him together. The head injury is a concern, as the doctor declares with his hooves clacking together, and it seems as though Zoro was thrown or pushed with some force, he explains, noting the abrasions on his arms and describing lacerations on his back.

"They'll scar?" Luffy hands, eyes drifting to where the swordsman's hands are laid, noticing the cuts and scrapes that mark his skin from a lifetime long ago.

"The lacerations might," Chopper says. "Some of them are quite deep - he must have skidded across the rubble. But that doesn't surprise me, with how strong that man had been."

Luffy goes to ruffle the doctor's fur but stops, hand hovering over Chopper's fluffy head. "'That man'?"

"Oh, you didn't see him?" the other asks, leaning up just slightly to nudge the captain's hand. Obliging, Luffy begins to stroke the thick strands of fur, and Chopper seems to forget himself for a moment, content to relax under the care.

"See who?" Luffy asks, but Chopper replies only with a happy little sigh.

"Our doctor refers to Bartholomew Kuma," Robin interrupts, coming to kneel on Zoro's other side. She brings news of the crew, no doubt, and they are well despite their worry if the plate of bread and cheese she passes over is any indication. "He's a Shichibukai - a formidable opponent. He attacked us not long after Moriah's defeat at your hands."

Our hands, Luffy wants to say, but his mouth is locked in a flabbergasted gape, mind a whirl of sensations and fragments of a memory - a man in spotted trousers and paws instead of hands.

"What happened?" he asks.

"He demanded your head - pointlessly, of course," the archaeologist replies, smiling an assassin's smile. Her protectiveness is a beautiful thing; she's come so far from her days of rain with the Baroque works, and Luffy's heart swells with pride as she recounts the crew's determination. "He wished to cause us great harm and we were weakened, easily defeated. I can only imagine that our swordsman, here, has a role in our present well-being."

It is not in Zoro's nature to sit idle while his nakama fight and bleed, Luffy knows, but the swordsman's corporeality and subsequent injury raises many a question as to _how_ exactly Kuma's defeat came to be. Is Zoro more powerful than any of them had known, or did something occur while the remaining Straw Hats lay unaware?

"What'd he do?" Luffy asks, gaze steady on the wheezing rise and fall of the swordsman's chest. Chopper has done what he can for now - done everything in his power, with the equipment available to him - and yet Zoro's deathly pallor is still haunting to look at.

(And to think they had expected Zoro's corporeality to be something to celebrate).

Robin merely inclines her head at the question, eyes softening as she gazes upon the unconscious man. "I can only speculate," she mutters, voice tinged a thoughtful blue. "Won't you eat, captain? Our cook is adamant that we build up our strength even before dinner."

Luffy frowns at the plate of cheese and snacks, but dutifully plops a chunk of cheddar into his mouth. Then he waves the plate under Chopper's blue nose, gently nudging the reindeer from his exhausted doze.

"Wha - oh. Thank you," Chopper mumbles, rubbing at his eyes. "Oh! I should check Sanji - where is he?"

"He claims to be feeling better now," Robin explains before the doctor can rush to locate the sickly cook. "Nausea while giving blood is not an uncommon reaction. Franky gave him a bottle of cola and he seems to have perked up for the time being."

There is no doubt that Chopper already knows all about the risks of blood transfusions, but the Zoan seems pacified by Robin's serenity all the same.

"Is Franky around?" he asks instead, munching through a sandwich triangle. "I want to move Zoro to the Sunny."

"I can carry him," Luffy offers.

"I really need a stretcher," Chopper explains, ears twitching as the captain pouts. "But thank you. I'm sure Zoro will appreciate it?"

He sounds uncertain - looks it too, with his big, child-like eyes - and Robin laughs quietly, chuckling a soft noise of surprise.

"I'm sure our swordsman has come to appreciate many things throughout his time in this crew," she says, crow's feet wrinkles forming at her eyes. "But I don't think he'll say the same about being carried, do you?"

"But I carry WadÅ• Ichimonji all the time," Luffy argues, gesturing to the katana at his hip. He supposes he won't from now on, not now that Zoro can step into battle for himself, and that thought both thrills and saddens Luffy, so accustomed to the katana's weight as he is.

(He'd never keep the WadÅ• Ichimonji from Zoro though).

"It's a little different, captain," the archaeologist explains, smiling all the while. "Many things will be different now, don't you think?"

She's right to ask with such a weighted tone, (of course she is, she's Robin, and many things will be changing now) but Chopper has shrunk into silence again, small and glum at Luffy's side, and so the captain tries to smile.

"Franky'll have to make another bed?" he replies, deliberately raising his intonation into a question, and this time, his nakama laugh.

* * *

><p>"Luffy," Nami sighs, her call startling the slumbering captain into awakening. Unsympathetic though her voice may be, the sharp angles of her crossed arms and despairing frown seem softer than usual. "Come on, you can't sleep in here forever."<p>

"It won't be forever," he argues, peeling a groggy, post-nap head away from the infirmary bed. He hates napping, waking slurred and slumped and missing hours of possible adventure, but Zoro has been sleeping for so long now that just looking at the swordsman is

making Luffy tired.

(And worried, but mostly tired - tired of waiting and tired of _not knowing_).

He shoots the navigator a weary smile, hoping it will reassure her. "Just until Zoro wakes up."

Nami calls out his bullshit as usual, but with a notable absence of her fist striking his head. "Chopper's already got enough to worry about with this idiot here," she says, tugging him from his slouch over Zoro's bedside. "It's not fair to make him worry about you too, is it?"

She says _Chopper_, but they both know she really means _the crew._

"I just want him to wake up," Luffy mutters, allowing his second crewmember to lead him through the kitchen and out onto the deck. She grabs a tupperware box that someone has left on the bar counter as she goes, shoving it into the captain's hands.

"I know, Luffy, I know," she says, marching him and the box of pies to the Sunny's grassy deck. "And he will - he always has, hasn't he?"

Luffy flops down onto the grass, spying Usopp and Brook watching from the upper deck. The skeleton's presence on the ship is still a little queer; Brook, himself, has a daily schedule entirely of his own, and though the crew surround him in their day-to-day lives, the musician seems to have trouble with merging his life with theirs. Long, lonely years within the Florian Triangle would do that to any man, and Luffy aches to see his nakama so lost amongst his home.

Nami sits opposite, appearing to commit herself to watching the captain eat the entire box of pies. This won't be difficult - Luffy hadn't realised how hungry he is until he shoves the first pastry into his mouth. A second one rapidly follows, hardly chewed before the captain swallows it down.

He pauses at the third, running his fingers along the plastic tub.

"But I _have _been calling him," he stresses, frowning at the remaining selection of pies. His crew are coping with the aftermath of Thriller Bark in their own way, but Luffy wonders if he's been coping at all. "It's been days now. I wanna ask him how he made himself all solid."

He wants to ask Zoro if he's all right, really, but Luffy would be insulting his crew's intelligence if he thought they didn't already know that. The infirmary has scarcely been without the Straw Hat captain since embarking from Thriller Bark; Fishman Island is an adventure just waiting to begin, the island at the edge of the Red Line, the first stop into the legendary New World and one of many towards Raftel and gold, but Luffy wants Zoro to be there when they enter that treacherous sea. Half the world they've sailed with Zoro within the WadÅ• Ichimonji; it's about time he felt the ocean romance, the wind, the waves, the sand between his toes, for himself.

"Robin's speculating that it might have something to do with Kuma's Devil Fruit," Nami supplies. "Sanji-san did say that all Zoro needed was a - well - a push. We don't know what the limits of Kuma's ability are, and Chopper said that some of his injuries were probably acquired from being thrownâ€|?"

Luffy blinks, pork pie hovering mere centimetres from his mouth. Kuma's Devil Fruit ability sounds weird, but he's seen stranger things on the Grand Line for sure. He doesn't doubt Robin's theory for a second, but it doesn't explain how or why Zoro has come to be so terribly inflicted with wounds.

Maybe that's something Luffy can only ask his first mate - if nobody else knows.

Nami sighs, interpreting his stupor as a lack of understanding, and leans her face into her hand.

"Eat the damn pie," she says, and Luffy does, pausing only for a moment to wonder if Zoro would like one when he wakes.

* * *

><p>Waves roll beneath the Thousand Sunny; the free ocean air carries them along. Beyond the murky Florian Triangle, the seas are clear and the horizons wide, and towards Fishman Island, the pirate crew sail smoothly. Zoro sleeps, heals, and sleeps some more; bandages are changed, drugs are administered, and occasionally, briefly, his body seems to wake, a warrior's instincts causing him to twitch, tense, and flinch, but he doesn't open his eyes. Soon, the rest of the crew recover and turn their eyes to the adventures beyond; Nami plots her maps, Usopp experiments in his lab, and even Franky slaves away in the depths of his workshop, upgrading the Sunny to accommodate nine.<p>

Brook gets a new bed, too, but he hardly seems to use it. Sometimes, when the night's watch is long and Luffy has grown weary with watching Zoro sleep himself to death, the captain flops out onto the deck and traces pictures in the stars. It is here that he can often find Brook humming by the mainsail - his music is solitary and mellow, never once waking the crew, but his violin sings with such a lonely tune that Luffy is sure that Brook could wake the dead, if he wished, if he ever could bear to face the crew he's lost.

Sometimes, Luffy plods over to make his presence known (Brook's songs are cheerier when he's there - when his captain is watching with eyes of starlight, a smile of gold). Sometimes he says nothing, but sometimes they talk, and sometimes Brook is trapped within himself until Luffy takes the violin bow.

The first time, Brook continues to sing his lonely song for many hours more. The second, he seems surprised to find his bow vanished from his grasp, and then laughs a jolly melody when Luffy waves it under his nose. The third time, the skeleton merely stares at something beyond the captain's presence - beyond the Sunny, even, beyond even the sky - and says, "How easy it would be to join the symphony in the night."

That time, Luffy takes Brook's icy hand and leads him into the

infirmary, folds him into the only chair, and then assumes a guard at Zoro's bedside where he can watch his swordsman and musician both.

He can do little for the things that haunt his nakama in the night.

"You should get some sleep, Luffy-san," Brook says one night, drinking air from a teacup because he finished his tea long ago. Familiar with the captain and musician's nightly routine, Sanji left a teapot with them before turning into bed, but it's been hours now and Brook's drunk all of it, leaving him to tinker with the cup to occupy his hands. His violin is propped by the door, lovingly laid beside the Wad   Ichimonji. The katana has not once left the infirmary since their departure from Thriller Bark - and neither has Zoro, much to the captain's despair.

"I can keep you company," Luffy says, stifling a yawn. Slept has not come easily over these past few days, and Nami and Usopp have been making their disapproval known. Worrying them is the last thing he wants, so he shuts himself in the infirmary and stays out of the way, unaware that it's this that is causing the most concern.

"Thank you, but truly, I think Zoro-san will be company enough," says Brook, which is a weird thing to say, Luffy thinks, considering that the first mate is still unconscious, but maybe when you've drifted on the seas for half a century alone, the mere presence of another is a dream.

"A captain will need his sleep before we cross into the New World," the musician adds. "I can watch Zoro-san for a few hours, although I have no eyes to see!"

Brook laughs quietly, bones chinking together in the midnight calm. "Skull joke!" he whispers, muffling the sound behind the sleeve of his blazer. Luffy smiles with him, gratified by the ridiculous pun, and then submits to his nakama's request when Brook ushers him from the room.

Not two hours later, the skeleton comes tottering into the men's quarters and shakes both the captain and doctor awake, sing-songing about Zoro waking up. Luffy hurtles out of his hammock, scooping up the sleepy doctor as he bounds past, and by the time they've catapulted across the ship and bounded into the infirmary, Chopper is wide awake and squealing into the captain's ear. Zoro appears not to have moved since Luffy lugged himself into bed, but trusting in Brook's word, Luffy plops Chopper down and then bundles himself to the swordsman's bedside.

"Zoro?" he calls, reaching out. He lays a gentle hand on the first mate's chest, worried that even the slightest touch may harm him.

Brook ducks back into the room then, perching in the corner beside his violin and the Wad   Ichimonji, and from the kitchen, Sanji emits a bellowing yawn before clattering around in the fridge. Chopper rushes to the bed, checking monitors for things that Luffy can only fathom, and seems pleased with whatever the numbers and squiggles tell him, if still a little worried.

Zoro stirs. Two charcoal eyes blink open, brow heavy and shadowing above them, dragging the man's expression down. His lips grind together, dry against agony, thirst making him gasp, and his hands clench the bedsheet as reality rights itself around him. Luffy scoops up one of those hands, and Zoro rolls his head to the side, slurring something that might have been a name. Chopper dashes into motion immediately, checking heart rate, blood pressure, and more, and Zoro groans when the doctor slides a stethoscope over his chest.

"Zoro's hurt real bad, but he's all right now," Luffy says, earning a small smile from the doctor and another slurred question from the swordsman. "Everyone else is fine too. We left Thriller Bark days ago - you missed the party!"

"Sorry captain," Zoro murmurs, but he doesn't sound sorry - in fact, heartfelt beyond agony clogs his voice (relief, it sounds; gratitude), and his eyes are pleased despite the sorry state that exhaustion has left him in, dazed, pallid, and grey.

Luffy grins wide and bright. "We'll just have to have another one now that you're up!"

"Which you are not, by the way," Chopper interrupts, levelling both the captain and first mate with a stern look. His gaze flicks between them, brows furrowing as though he cannot decide who deserves his ire more. "If I see you take one step out of his bed before I give you the 'all clear' there will be consequences."

"The tally?" Zoro asks, eyes crossing as he watches the reindeer's hoof waggle over his nose.

Chopper's anger ebbs away at the pitiful whine, but he tries to maintain his superiority by puffing out his chest. He looks silly, and Luffy bites back a smile as the doctor adds, "Don't think I've forgotten about that."

"Could never," Zoro slurs, and Chopper flusters, apparently interpreting that as a compliment.

Luffy winks at the swordsman and Zoro laughs - then coughs, spluttering saliva across the pillow, and wheezes a shuddering breath of pain. Chopper's ears droop, the excruciating sounds eradicating the light-hearted atmosphere, and even Luffy's smile dims as Zoro's coughing doesn't stop. Feverish flush burns across the first mate's nose, a bruising scarlet highlighting the shadows on his dark, sallow skin. The doctor lays a spring-smelling cloth across his chest, urging Zoro to take a deep breath if he can.

A knock at the door and Sanji enters, his arms laden with a tray. Brook tucks his knees in to let the cook past, and Sanji beelines to the bed with an expression of grim determination - one that contrasts his sloppy tracksuit trousers and rose-pink pyjama shirt.

Chopper takes the glass of water from him immediately, beckoning Zoro to drink.

"Leek and potato," the cook says, placing the bowl of soup on the bedside surface.

Zoro guzzles the water and then splutters, "Fuck," which is

marginally better than his uncontrollable coughing, although Sanji doesn't seem to agree.

"Unless you've got a problem with leek and potato, you're going to eat this," he warns, and not even Luffy would dare to argue at Sanji's angry, _weary_ sigh. "Dietary requirements? Allergies?"

Zoro shakes his head, choppy hair plastered to his forehead with sweat, but then seems to recognise the cook's dog-tired countenance as something beyond this isolated exchange. He mumbles "Meat," and the cook glowers.

"I ain't giving you anything that heavy yet, idiot," Sanji snaps, but when Zoro shakes his head again - no - he, too, reconsiders what is being said.

"Vegetarian?" he asks the swordsman, and Luffy's stomach twists in horror at the thought. Sanji, too, seems uncomfortable with the idea, if only due to the difficulty with such a restricted diet at sea - but then Zoro shakes his head, and one swirly eyebrow lifts in surprise.

"Pescatarian then - you eat fish?" Sanji guesses, sounding relieved. "Good, sometimes there's nothing but fish to eat out here. Come on, sit up, you think you can hold this?"

Zoro attempts a shrug as the cook offers the soup, and something seems to pass between the two in that moment; understanding, maybe, or at the very least a past experience shared.

"Luffy-san," Brook calls from the doorway, and Luffy whirls around, having almost forgotten the skeleton in his silence. "May I suggest returning to bed? I believe our swordsman is in capable hands here."

Though reluctant, Luffy obliges to the request. Letting his hand slip away from Zoro's, he budes out of the way to allow Chopper and Sanji to work their magic. The cook assumes Luffy's place immediately, gangly figure swamped by his choice of pyjamas, and as Zoro grumbles a sleepy submission to the care, Luffy yawns, realising just how tired he is.

"Come now, captain, Zoro-san will be all right," Brook urges, laying a hand on Luffy's back. He ushers the captain from the infirmary, tinkering a joyful sound that follows them both to sleep, a wind-chime warding the last of their worries away.

* * *

><p>Zoro sleeps for the rest of the day, rousing only at Sanji's insistence that he eat. The rest of the crew are informed of their first mate's developing recovery at breakfast, and thus take it upon themselves to visit the slumbering swordsman throughout the day. That he has awoken without any permanent damage has lifted a weight from the Sunny, and by the following morning, Zoro's request to leave the infirmary is met with laughter and incredulous sighs.<p>

"He bounces back faster than you, Straw Hat," Franky comments, grinning lopsidedly as Zoro and Chopper's argument reverberates into the kitchen. The cyborg laughs at the captain's wide-eyed coo of

really? and nudges the rubber man with one, hefty elbow.

"Aren't you supposed to reconcile intra-crew disputes?"

Opposite him at the table, Luffy slurps up a glass of chocolate milk and begins to fiddle with the straw. "Ah, Nami's better at it than me," he says, but he turns his head towards the infirmary door anyway, tuning into the conversation taking place. "But maybe if Zoro says he feels better, then he feels better?"

Franky shrugs. "You know him best," he says lightly, and Luffy blinks, still hearing the _weight_ to such a claim.

"I do?"

"He's your first mate, ain't he bro? What'd you think?"

Luffy sucks up the last of his drink and then bounds into the infirmary to rescue his swordsman from Chopper's loving wrath. The doctor isn't pleased about being overruled by Luffy's dopey smile, and grudgingly allows Zoro out of his immediate vicinity. His reluctance comes with a whole list of demands ("Don't do anything strenuous! Make sure you rest! Your injuries are still healing, _please_ take it easy.") and both captain and first mate nod along like mischievous schoolboys, half-listening to the rant.

Chopper isn't blind enough not to notice. "You're a terrible influence on each other," he sighs, giving up. He transforms into Heavy Point, and for a split second it seems as though he intends to trap Zoro in the bed, but then he reaches for the swordsman and gently guides him onto his feet.

"If you so much as _sneeze_â€|" the reindeer warns, huge and menacing as he towers above them.

"I'll be sure to hide from you," Zoro says, and his grin is promptly smothered by the doctor swooping down and _glomping_ _him with a hug.

"I knew you were going to be a terrible patient!" Chopper wails, clinging to the swordsman so very carefully. He sniffs, burying his face in the humungous t-shirt that Franky has lent their possession-less nakama, and Zoro emits a peculiar sound - neither a squawk nor a hiss of pain, but something similar, soft and uninvited.

"What is it?" Luffy asks, and Chopper _does_ _squawk, terrified that he's caused his patient pain.

"It's nothing," Zoro insists, but his voice is thick - clogged, like when he first awoke - and Chopper frantically inspects his bandages for blood. "It's all right; I'm not hurt, Chopper, really."

Luffy is sure that it's a different kind of hurt, but he doesn't say anything. Rather, he waits until Zoro is released from the reindeer's fussing and then latches onto his hand, fully intending to drag the swordsman into an exploration of the Sunny.

Only - Zoro doesn't budge, standing instead like an iron slab in the centre of the infirmary. He breathes _how_ with an expression of

sheer incredulity - bafflement like Luffy has never seen before - and they stare at him.

"How what?" Luffy asks, tugging Zoro's arm.

"Don't laugh," Zoro grumbles, and Luffy cocks his head, utterly perplexed by the demand until the swordsman adds, "I think I've - _fuck it_."

He takes one determined stride in the captain's direction before his knees _cave_ beneath him; he flails, hops, _spins_, and crashes into the desk, practically tackling the chair beside it as he belly-flops the floor.

Chopper shrieks to the high heavens and Luffy _howls_.

* * *

><p>"My, Franky, his hair's almost as vibrant as yours in the sunlight," Robin observes, sipping the blueberry milkshake that the cyborg had brought out for her. How Franky had persuaded Sanji not to offer the drink himself, unctuous flourish and all, is a mystery, but Robin seems unconcerned by this curiosity in a way she seldom is with the peculiarities of the world.<p>

Robin is correct; Zoro's hair _is_ particularly green in the midday light, and Luffy and Franky share a bout of laughter at the swordsman's expense. On the Sunny's grassy deck, Zoro and Usopp are conversing boisterously, the sniper's body in animation as he shares some adventurous tale. There is no doubt that Zoro is listening attentively, but as the Sunny sways and the cloud bob over them, the sky slipping in and out of shadow, he seems to turn towards the sunlight as it appears, and bask momentarily in the amber warmth and glow.

"Maybe he _does_ photosynthesise," Luffy says, squishing his rubbery cheeks into his hands. "That's where flowers eat light and stuff, right?"

"On some level, yes captain," Robin says, stirring the milkshake with one of the straws. The other, she gestures towards Franky, and Luffy completely misses the cyborg's expression in favour of watching his first mate appreciate the afternoon sun.

Zoro seemsâ€¦| _surprised_ every time the light hits his face.

(He was surprised, too, back when the crew involved him in conversation for the first time).

"So he's a _sunflower_," Nami calls from the upper deck, watering can dripping down the Adam's Wood walls. "Sanji-san was right after all."

"What an apt description of our swordsman," Robin muses, eyes shining. Beside her, Franky slurps the milkshake in a noisy agreement.

Luffy nods along, but he's not really listening anymore.

* * *

><p>As Zoro slowly heals, Chopper begins to make good use of his 'hugs Zoro owes me when he's tangible' list. He's hesitant, at first, as the first mate's recovery involves more sleep than anything else, but his desire to make up for lost time soon wins out. Considerately, he adopts his tiniest form when pouncing on the swordsman, but this doesn't make it any less entertaining as his big eyes bring Zoro to his knees.<p>

"I didn't realise I owed him so many," Zoro despairs one afternoon, hauling a towel up out of the laundry basket. Laundry is one of the less desirable chores on the Sunny, but he'll resign himself to any subservience, it seems, for a hug-free moment of peace.

Brook tinkers a laugh as he accepts the fuzzy towel, swiftly folding it into a perfect square. It's a skill neither Zoro nor Luffy have acquired, the latter of whom watches from his hammock, banned from sorting the washing after one mishap too many.

"If I may be so bold, you don't seem to mind the hugs," Brook comments, accepting the first of Sanji's million shirts.

Zoro throws another ball of socks onto the steadily growing pile, embarrassment brightening his dark complexion. He doesn't say anything more for a moment, but then, eventually, he works up the courage to admit: "He's justâ€¦ really soft."

Luffy coos despite himself, and Zoro grimaces, waving another sock-ball at him threateningly.

"Yes," Brook says with a melancholy chime, and Luffy stops laughing instantly. Zoro, too, goes very still, but the musician seems apart from them, in that moment, adrift as he is at night.

"I noticed the same thing," he says, not that Luffy really understands; how could anybody _not_ notice that Chopper is cute and soft and perfectly huggable? The skeleton smiles then, long fingers straightening the collar of Sanji's shirt. "Although I have no eyes to see! Yohohohoho."

"Skull joke," Zoro mutters, laughing along.

"But that wasn't a skull joke," Luffy says, perplexed but happy to hear them enjoying themselves. Their laughter doesn't cease, especially when Brook discovers a bra that has found its way into the men's washing.

"Oh my, no," he giggles, hanging the underwear up on the end of Luffy's bunk. "I suppose it wasn't, was it?"

Zoro and Brook's friendship does not go unnoticed by the rest of the crew; kindled spirits, Franky romanticises, which is both a pun and surprisingly accurate, and poses the question as to the limitations of Zoro's new body. Robin muses that they can see a part of themselves in each other (they have both been alone for so long, she notes) and the others, too, reconsider Zoro's odd behaviour (his gravitation towards the sun, pensive periods of silence, and the way he edges around the ship, sometimes, as though expecting it to disappear) in a new light.

"Do you think he'sâ€¦ okay?" Usopp mutters the day that the first of Zoro's bandages come off, as rain and sleet hammer the Sunny from above, and the thick, ocean currents wage war against the hull. The aquarium bar is peaceful despite the onslaught, and the sniper is using the miserable weather to take the chance to study their captured marine life.

Luffy can't draw anything, so he loves watching his talented nakama sketch, paint, and curse as he mixes his acrylics wrong.

"Eh?" he asks, attention lifting from Usopp's sketchpad. He is sprawled out on the checked floor beside the sniper, kicking his legs in the air as he watches Usopp work his artistic magic.

"You mean Zoro?" Luffy asks.

The sniper nods grimly, glancing at the captain before dipping the paintbrush back into the paint palette. He swipes the brush around vigorously, the fish in the tank above them disinterested with the enthusiasm.

Luffy blinks, perplexed by the deep furrow of Usopp's brow.

"He's quiet, isn't he?" Usopp adds, beginning to fiddle with the paintbrush. "And he doesn't really initiate conversations, does he? Like Brook. Do you think he'sâ€¦ I mean, being corporeal must be a _shock_."

"He's happier," Luffy says; he knows this to be true. There is no doubt that corporeality _did_ come as a shock to the swordsman, but Zoro appears to be adapting well, finally able to interact bodily and whole with nakama.

"Yeah, I know! I know. Butâ€¦" Usopp deepens his frown, tapping the brush against his chin. "Maybe I'm just thinking about it too much, butâ€¦ Sanji has to remind him to eat, you know? And I dunno but, Zoro seems to kind ofâ€¦ _forget_ that he's here, sometimes?"

"We're here," Luffy reassures, understanding Usopp's concerns. Everything the sniper has said is true, but Luffy is confident that things will work out - they always have, and they always will with a crew (a family) like theirs. "We can remind him. Zoro's not going to go anywhere."

"Well he _can't_ _at the moment, can he?" Usopp replies, gesturing vaguely to the ship, the sky, and the stormy seas. "But yeah, yeah you're right, he's not going to just _disappear_ or anything. Why was I worrying?" Usopp laughs as he lies but it seems to reassure him; he nods and drops his attention back to the painting, absorbing himself in the work once again.

Luffy smiles too, legs reassuming their lazy kicking, but Usopp's worries won't leave his mind; a seed of doubt has been planted, however unwittingly, and now it is all the captain can do not to rush off to locate their wayward swordsman. He sighs, squishes his cheek into a hand, and fixes a stare on Usopp's sketchpad until the feeling of uncertainty passes.

Usopp pops open another tube of acrylic. With a critical eye, he considers his next brushstroke and twiddles the brush between his

fingers. To the painting he says, "Just go and talk to him, yeah?" but it is Luffy who answers, scrambling to his feet and darting out of the door.

Rain hammers down, soaking the captain as he springs across the deck. The crow's nest would be the first place to look for Zoro if he wasn't severely wounded - the rope ladder wasn't designed with traumatic injuries in mind - so Luffy scampers into the men's quarters instead. It seems empty at first glance, but then he spies a pair of feet hanging over one of the sofa's arms. It's Zoro, sprawled over the cushions and snoozing quietly, arms folded behind his head. Padding over with his flip-flops squelching all the while, Luffy considers how best to rouse the slumbering swordsman without further aggravating his wounds.

Some of his bandages have been removed, and now Luffy can see part of a jagged, stitch-torn scar across his chest, the skin around it pulled taut and twisted into shape. It's a sloppy example of Chopper's usual skill if it is the Zoan's handiwork, and Luffy pouts, edging closer.

"What," Zoro says, dark eyes peeking open. His golden earrings chime as he tilts his head, appraising the captain's resolute look.

"Did Kuma give Zoro that scar?"

"Huh? Oh," Zoro says, ghosting his fingers down the scar in question, a grotesque remnant of a wound that must have nearly carved him in two. His hand hesitates at his ribcage, fingertips light over the dark tissue, and his gaze seems to drift far away.

"No," he says eventually, face twisting in something that Luffy hesitates to label as anger. "He didn't."

The captain frowns and reaches out, laying his hand just beside Zoro's. The swordsman twitches beneath his touch, hand jerking away from the scar, but Luffy stays put as he retraces along the edge of the wound.

It must have nearly killed him.

(Maybe it did).

"D'you remember what happened?"

Zoro grimaces, but it is not Luffy's caress that is causing him pain. "Not really; it was a long time ago. He's dead now, anyway. It doesn't matter anymore."

"No, it does matter. Did you achieve your dream before?" Luffy shakes his head to rid himself of that horrible thought, frown darkening into a scowl. "Before this? Or did he take that away from you?"

Hearing the ferocity in Luffy's voice and recognising this as a serious matter, Zoro props himself up, a twitch of his lips the sole indication of any pain. Luffy's hand stays where it is, clenching as though daring Zoro to move it, but the first mate allows the contact - encourages it even, as he tugs Luffy into sitting opposite.

"Zoro had a dream, right?" the captain presses, and Zoro huffs, watching Luffy's fingertips trail along the scar. "Was it something to do with that guy with the feather hat and the big sword?"

"It was a long time ago, captain," is the reply, which is just as much a _no_ as it is a _yes_.

"We weren't at the Baratie _that_ long ago."

Charcoal eyes roll; _you're not getting it_, they seem to say. "No, before that. But it was his title I was interested in, anyway."

(_Was, was, was_ â€" what about _is_? What about _will be_?)

Luffy pulls away, rocking back on his knees. Straw scratches the back his neck, adding to the little bump of scars already there, but he doesn't feel the pain from such a familiar and loved movement anymore. The hat is his dream, his hopes and desires all weaved and tied together, and he'll have to return it to its rightful owner once it bears the weight of that dream no more. But what has Zoro's dream left him with? Motivation? Dedication? Or just a scar on the outside and a hundred wounds within?

How can Luffy change that?

"Then Zoro didn't fulfil his dream?" he asks, hoping that he's wrong but knowing that he's right. Brook lingers on to see Laboon again, to fulfil his promise from many years ago, so the force that tied Zoro to the Wad   Ichimonji must be one of the same.

Zoro inhales sharply, eyes rising to mirror the captain's stern look. "What do you want me to say? No? That I failed? That I wasn't good enough?"

"Yes," Luffy breathes, choppy hair bouncing as he nods his head. Surprise flashes across the other's face, as brief and sharp as the Wad   Ichimonji's sparks, and Luffy softens his expression. "Because Zoro's here now, right? He can still do whatever it is that he wants to do 'cause it's still important to him. And we'll help him because we're nakama; because his dream is just as important as everyone else's."

_Right? says the tilt of his head, the sway of the straw hat across his shoulders.

And Zoro looks at him with the most peculiar expression, all fond and warm and yearning to be understood, and says -

"_No_, Luffy it's - that dream - it's not important anymore. I was selfish and young and _proud_, but I've been in the Wad   Ichimonji long enough to know that there are more important things to fight for."

"Like what?" Luffy interrupts - and _not_, in fact, arguing the matter, because he's been longing to understand what motivates his first mate for so long now, and if that's _not_ what it was when they first met, then how has it come to change?

Only - Zoro shakes his head. "I have a better dream now," is all he

says, but he means it in earnest, and thoughts of his dream - whatever it is - coax a smile onto his face, softening his expression into something more likeâ€|

More like something that yearns to be kissed.

And Luffy believes him.

* * *

><p>They don't kiss.<p>

(But the tide pulls them in anyway).

* * *

><p>As the Sunny bobs on, routine finally finds its way into her crew's lives. Mealtimes are more rowdy than ever, nine pirates squeezed around a table for eight; I'll have to make a bigger one, Franky comments, rubbing his pointed chin after Nami gets elbowed for a fifth time and wallops the captain again. Few places are quiet on the Thousand Sunny, large though as she is, but a ship full of life never fails to put a smile on Luffy's face. Now that Thriller Bark is long behind them, his nakama can rest, heal and look forward to the dreams they have ahead.

All of them can.

Keimi still surprises them right out the blue. She thanks them profoundly for saving her life, the Sea King that had swallowed her darting away after Luffy's tremendous punch. _OI SANJI_, the captain roars, arms flailing over the side of the Sunny, _DINNER'S GETTING AWAY_, but the chef is hardly listening with how the young mermaid is blubbering gratitude at him, the Sea King saliva that she's covered in failing to detract from her bubbly, bright-eyed attractiveness.

"Her hair's almost as green as yours, Zoro," Usopp mutters, making a thoughtful noise as he compares the two hues. "Maybe it's a mermaid thing?"

Sanji can hardly tear his eyes away from Keimi, but he takes a moment to smirk in Zoro's direction. "So he's not moss; he's _seaweed_."

"I don't see you mocking her for it," the swordsman grumbles, crossing his arms over his chest. _Menacing _doesn't quite describe his expression; Luffy would say _pouting_, more than anything else, shooting the sniper and cook a 'thumbs up' even as Zoro begins to growl.

"That's because Keimi-chan isn't some barbaric meat-lug," Sanji says, practically swooning with delight as Keimi and Nami begin to chat. "Unlike you, _she's _cute."

"Zoro's ears go really red when he's embarrassed," Luffy counters, and the subsequent _slap_ is the first mate face palming and hiding his face in horror.

"See?" Luffy says.

Robin is the only one who refrains from goggling at Zoro. "Oh my," she says instead, smiling behind her hand, and judging by Zoro's deepening embarrassment, her amusement feels no different from the stares.

Once Chopper is assured that Keimi isn't suffering from any ill effects of nearly being digested and Luffy is pacified by promises of takoyaki, the Straw Hat pirates welcome their temporary guest. _What a cheerful young lady_, Brook says, laughing along as Keimi introduces herself to the crew. Keimi is, indeed, a rather merry, accident-prone mermaid, and when Robin notes that she may be able to guide them to Fishman Island, Keimi is happy to show them the way.

"I'll have to call Hatchan and let him know I'm okay!" she says, completely unfazed about her near-death experience within the bowels of a Sea King. Chatting all the while about _Hatchan_ and _takoyaki_, the mermaid accepts a Den Den Mushi from Nami and gleefully begins to dial.

Her face falls as the line connects - and with it, the Straw Hat pirates' spirits plummet.

All except the captain's, that is.

"Oh dear," Brook says, sounding far less worried than he should as Luffy dances around the deck chanting, _adventure, adventure!_ "I suppose this means we have plenty to look forward to?"

Usopp whines a pitiful sound that only seems to amuse the skeleton even more. "As long as it's not as bad as Thriller Bark," the sniper bemoans, raven curls of hair bobbing as he shakes his head from side-to-side.

Despite his crewmate's gloom, Luffy doesn't pause in his cheer. "I thought Thriller Bark was great!"

"You would," Nami despairs. "Why can't we have a happy adventure, for once?"

* * *

><p>In spite of her misgivances, Nami alters their course without further ado. Sabaody Archipelago is an island they hadn't originally planned to visit, but if it means ensuring that Keimi and her friends are safely returned to Fishman Island, then it's a detour they can afford. Luffy is going to be the King of the seas no matter how long it takes, so what's one more island on the journey to Raftel?<p>

"If you're sure," is all Nami says, and instead of calling him _captain_ as most would, she _tweak_ him on the head with a map. He whines in good nature, clutching the choppy strands of his hair, and the navigator's unsympathetic expression only deepens. "Now get out and let me chart our course in peace."

Luffy goes merrily, almost tripping over their scampering doctor as he springs down from the library. Chopper squeals as the captain tumbles over him, but unharmed he calls after Luffy as the rubber man bounces down the hall.

"Luffy, Luffy! This was still in the infirmary, and I kept knocking it over soâ€¦!"

His hat tilting as he addresses the taller Devil Fruit user, Chopper holds out the Wad   Ichimonji as he has done a dozen times before, the white sheath oversized but securely held between his little hooves. Luffy stares, thinking it strange, all of a sudden, that Zoro no longer resides within the sword, and yet the treasured blade is still within Chopper's possession.

"It's Zoro's sword," he says; _why's Zoro not got it?_ he wonders, belatedly wincing at his tone as Chopper jerks in surprise. The Zoan frowns down at the blade, perhaps pondering the question himself, and Luffy rushes to thank the doctor and put a smile back onto his face. Luffy accepts the Wad   Ichimonji and Chopper's flustered profanity, but as he holds the katana as he has for all these previous months, he cannot bring himself to slip it into his belt at his side.

"Sorry for messing up your infirmary," Luffy says, _bopping_ Chopper's turquoise nose before dashing off to locate their swordless swordsman. He _is_ in the crow's nest this time, which is probably the only reason that Chopper didn't manage to find him; if the doctor could see the weights that Zoro is lifting, he would definitely have a few things to say. Franky will be glad to see his hard work being appreciated at any least, although the way Zoro's face twists as he hauls up the weights seems more like frustration than any good-will.

The captain bounces over, waving the katana over his head. At the beckoning, Zoro pauses in his exercise, face a bright scarlet with sweat but the most untroubled that Luffy has seen it in days, but it pales into grey when he notices what it is that Luffy holds in his hands.

"Hey, hey, Zoro, don't you want this? It's Zoro's sword, isn't it?"

Luffy doesn't wait for a response before he shoves the katana into the hands of its rightful wielder. One of the dumb-bells clanks as it hits the floor, dropped in the first mate's haste not to do the same to the blade, and Luffy hops over the dumb-bell as he dances around Zoro and his deer-like expression of stupor.

The Wad   Ichimonji flickers a brilliant blue in Zoro's grasp, the iridescent light catching the tinge of sorrow in his eyes.

Grief, Luffy remembers, thinking back to the swordsman's shadow at Thriller Bark.

"Yeah," Zoro says, the moment passing. Luffy doesn't doubt for a second that he saw it, but he doesn't press the issue. As long as Zoro is happy to be on his crew, happy with his dream, and happy to sail all the way to One Piece and on, then Luffy is happy too.

"Zoro's happy to be my swordsman, isn't he?" the captain asks, rocking back on the balls of his feet. Hands stuffed into the pockets of his shorts, he's at ease, and he wants Zoro to be at ease too.

Plus, having another swordsman on his ship is going to be
great.

"Yeah," Zoro says, more confidently this time. He drums his fingers along WadÅ• Ichimonji's hilt as Luffy used to do, then raises a cocksure eyebrow as his mouth quirks upwards in reflection of a conversation many weeks ago. "Sorry captain, I guess I must have forgotten to pick it up. Won't happen again."

(_Good thing none of us want to leave then, isn't it?_)

Luffy beams brilliantly, and the tips of Zoro's ears tinge a little red. "Good!" he replies, laughing his signature laugh. "I think you owe Chopper another hug now."

"Oh yeah?" Zoro challenges, picking up the dropped dumb-bell before Luffy trips over it with all his bouncing around. His brash confidence increases as he tilts up his head, practically daring the captain. "Shouldn't I be owing _you_ this hug?"

He says it without any hint that it may be something he wants, but Luffy knows better now.

"Zoro can have a hug if he wants!"

"Err, no, I didn't -"

Realisation dawns on Zoro's face the second before Luffy pounces, but instead of fleeing like the captain half expects, he tosses the dumb-bell aside to make way for the bounding, unstoppable man.

Luffy _sweeps_ him off his feet, and Zoro - well, Zoro makes that weird happy-surprised noise he can't seem to help whenever Chopper seeks him out for comfort, and Luffy's laughter bellows around the crow's nest. There's definitely a protest somewhere within the swordsman's squawking, but as he whirls around the gym hoisted half-over one of Luffy's shoulders, he starts to laugh as well, great, rumbling rolls of it like thunder in the captain's ear.

"Ah, Zoro was so much lighter in WadÅ• Ichimonji! Does that mean he's made of bones and stuff?" Luffy says, hauling the age-old spirit further over his shoulder. He wiggles about until Zoro is securely laid across him in a fireman's lift (the comfort of which is debatable), Zoro's affronted expression and choppy, spring-green hair just visible in the corner of his eye.

Luffy snickers. "You're blushing! Must be human."

"What sort of logic is that? Put me _down_."

"_Ah_ - how about no?"

Zoro huffs, scrunching up Luffy's waistcoat in his fist. He doesn't go as far to offer the sniggering captain a sharp kick, although this may be due to Luffy's elasticated rib cage rather than any real hesitation. "How about _yes_?"

Luffy pretends to think about it for a moment, pouting lip and all. "Nah," he says, bounding around to inspect the dumb-bells and weights. His coos of intrigue are appropriately timed to muffle

Zoro's complaints, and Luffy's wicked smile only grows as the tension eases from the swordsman's shoulders, his body sagging with defeat.

"I think I'm squashing your hat."

That does induce a moment's pause, but not one long enough to reconsider letting his first mate go. "Don't worry, Zoro's not gonna hurt it."

"I didn't say hurt."

"Same thing."

"What is it with you and putting words into my mouth?"

As far as Luffy's aware, there isn't anything worth mentioning about putting words into Zoro's mouth, and he shoots the other a bemused expression as he explains: "Zoro doesn't want to squish my hat because he know it's really important to me, and he knows I'll be hurt if anything happens to my hat like how he'll be hurt if anything happens to WadÅ• Ichimonji - although I guess you were inside of it and my hat's not big enough to get inside of - and since he doesn't want to hurt me, he's worried about hurting my hat. See? Same thing. Except Zoro's not gonna hurt my hat, 'cause he's Zoro."

And Zoro - laughs. "Oh god," he wheezes, golden earrings tinkering as he ducks his head away from Luffy's gaze. It must be to hide his embarrassment, which is silly because Luffy can still see the blush burning down his neck. "I've chosen to follow a moron."

"Hey, I'll throw you overboard."

"Yeah, you've made that threat before."

"I mean it this time," Luffy insists, hauling the swordsman over to the window, his strides long and determined to make his point. Last time, Zoro had been trapped within the WadÅ• Ichimonji and thus incapable of swimming, but now Luffy won't feel any guilt when he tosses the (ex?)spirit off the deck.

"All right, all right, sheesh!" Zoro yelps, breathless with laughter. "Sheesh, oh my god. You don't even know if I can swim. Put me down, idiot."

As inconspicuous as an elephant in the room, Luffy re-latches the window shut. "Do I get anything for it?"

"Christ, you turning into Nami now?" the other pants, fixing the captain with an unimpressed glare. Dutifully, Luffy kneels down and rearranges Zoro back onto his feet, offering the disgruntled swordsman a cheeky smile.

"All right, you ever heard of SantÅ•ryÅ«?"

Luffy shakes his head, patting the man down for good measure. Hurting Zoro is the last thing he wanted, and he supposes with the remnants of Thriller Bark still healing beneath Chopper's most recent layer of bandages, he should have taken care before lugging Zoro around.

"What's SantÅ•ryÅ«?"

"It's - _stop_ patting me; if you want a hug, I'd rather you _ask_."

Scarred hands batting the captain's away, Zoro yanks Luffy forwards and into a hug. They both _oof_ as their chests thump together; Zoro's hands hover a moment, but then resolution urges them to enwrap the captain in a slightly awkward, rather warm, and surprisingly affectionate embrace.

"I wasn't trying to hug Zoro," Luffy admits, snickers stifled by Zoro's shirt. Despite the miscommunication, he accepts the hug anyway, winding his elasticated arms thrice around his first mate lest Zoro have any stupid ideas like trying to _get away_.

"You sneaky little -"

"Tell me about SantÅ•ryÅ«." Luffy says, batting innocent eyes. _On fire_ is a description more befitting of Zoro's face than the previous blush that had stained his cheeks, and the captain feels quite proud of himself for reducing Zoro to such discomposure.

Sanji had no idea what he was going on about when he said Zoro wasn't cute.

The first mate's chin _clunks_ against the top of Luffy's head, and though he cannot see it, Zoro presses a smile â€" a kiss? â€" into the bird's nest of Luffy's hair. "_Ugh_, whatever. It's something you'll like, I promise."

Zoro is right, Luffy is ecstatic to discover (once he releases the swordsman for long enough to demonstrate the full range of his abilities, at any rate).

SantÅ•ryÅ« is _pretty goddamn awesome _after all.

* * *

><p>End Notes: Thanks for reading!

End
file.